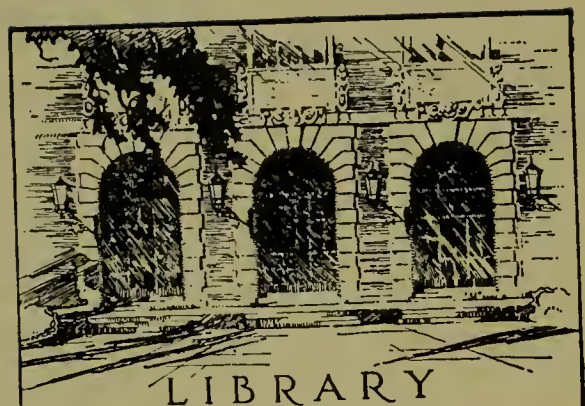

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THE WRONG ROAD

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BY HOOK OR CROOK

BY

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AUTHOR OF
'FAST AND LOOSE,' 'LOCKED UP,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE WRONG ROAD.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS MALADY.

THERE was intense excitement at Straddlethorpe Hall. The young owner, Sir Carysfort Lezaire, had been seized with a sudden illness, and lay at the point of death. The local doctor had been summoned from Market Reepham, and had given the young baronet his best attention from the moment of the first attack. But Mr Freshener, although a duly qualified practitioner, confessed that he was utterly at fault.

Sir Carysfort had been perfectly well that

same afternoon. It was not till the end of dinner that he complained of nausea and violent pains in the intestines. Lady Lezaire, his devoted mother, who watched over every ache and pain of her beloved son with an unremitting attention, immediately begged Sir Carysfort to take to his bed.

Directly she got him safe between the sheets, she tried the usual panaceas familiar to nursery treatment. Ginger cordials, hot bottles, fomentations, and such simple remedies were applied, but with no effect. The nausea continued, and soon developed into violent fits of sickness. Sir Carysfort now also complained of terrible pain and depression.

By this time Lady Lezaire's anxiety was communicated to the rest of the household. Her daughter, Mrs St Evelyn, appeared in the sick-room, and begged to be allowed to share in the nursing. Colonel St Evelyn, her son-in-law, expressed equal solicitude, and, much against her will, came and sat by the sick lad's bedside.

The evening drew on, and Sir Carysfort's condition certainly did not improve.

"Mr Freshener must be sent for, and that without loss of time," said Lady Lezaire.

"Do you think that necessary?" asked Colonel St Evelyn, who still continued in the room. "It is nothing more than a bilious attack. Carysfort is always so imprudent. Where has he been to-day? Does any one know?"

"Fishing," cried another voice from the bottom of the bed. "I was with him."

The speaker was young Hubert Podifat, who, like a favourite hound, had taken his post by Sir Carysfort's bedside a couple of hours before. No one had noticed the young man particularly: it was thought quite natural that he should devote himself to his patron and friend.

"I insist upon having a doctor!" repeated Lady Lezaire, imperatively. "If you will not send a message for me, Ferdinand, I must do it myself."

"Let me go," interposed Hubert, eagerly.

"You are a good boy," Lady Lezaire said.

"Tell Gibbings to send one of the grooms off, mounted, to Market Reepham."

"It is really quite preposterous," said the Colonel, with some irritation. "I wonder you don't keep a doctor permanently upon the premises."

Lady Lezaire did not deign to reply, but looked at her son-in-law in a manner which did not betoken much ardent affection.

"I suppose I am not wanted any more," said the Colonel; "but if I can be of the least use, pray send for me. You will find me in the study down-stairs."

He retired to his own sanctum, and was presently enjoying a Trichinopoly cheroot, and the latest edition of Ruff's Guide.

Quite an hour elapsed before Mr Freshener arrived. By this time Sir Carysfort's sufferings were aggravated in every particular—the former symptoms continued unchanged, and in addition he complained of a hot skin, a dry parched throat, his gums were swollen, and there was much salivation of the tongue.

"I really am quite perplexed," said little Mr Freshener. "I don't understand it at all."

"Is it a case quite beyond your skill?" asked Lady Lezaire. "Can you do nothing for my poor boy?"

"The symptoms are most peculiar," replied the local doctor, "and the only treatment that suggests itself, I am not prepared to administer."

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Lady Lezaire. "I have a medicine-chest."

"Yes, my lady; but have you a stomach-pump?"

"I am afraid not. Is it necessary?"

"Not absolutely, I trust; but it is the simplest treatment that occurs to me. If you will allow me, I will send my man back to the surgery for that and other requisites. Meanwhile, I will try bleeding, and if possible let Sir Carysfort have a warm bath."

The doctor's messenger went and returned, but the baronet's condition remained much the same.

"I really do not know what to do. I never

was so perplexed," the little doctor repeated again and again.

"Perhaps you would like other advice called in," suggested Lady Lezaire. "Do not hesitate. Everything shall be done that the case may demand. My darling boy's health comes before everything else. Whom would you suggest?"

"Well, my lady, in a case so obscure, the brightest lights of the profession alone can guide us. If I might venture to suggest, I should say summon Sir Peregrine Falcon."

"All the way from London?" put in a new voice. It was that of Colonel St Evelyn, who had returned. "Have you any idea, Lady Lezaire, what his fee would be? Those great swells charge at so much a mile."

"What is that compared with the life of my child?" She turned indignantly from her son-in-law, and said to Mr Freshener, "Do you suppose, Mr Freshener, that Sir Peregrine would come?"

"Failing him, we can send for Dr John

Robinson. I should advise your wiring for both."

"I may repeat, I think this very unnecessary," said Colonel St Evelyn.

"I cannot see that it is any affair of yours," replied Lady Lezaire; "and in a matter of such vital importance I shall act as I think best."

Telegrams were forthwith indited and despatched. Silence closed on the sick-room, broken only by the coming and going of the attendants, and the groans and hard breathing of the unfortunate patient as he writhed in agony on his bed of pain.

Let me pause here to state that Straddlethorpe was in a Midland county, more than a hundred miles from town.

The night was now so far advanced that, even if the telegrams reached Harley Street before morning, there was but little chance of Sir Peregrine Falcon or his colleague catching anything earlier than the newspaper-train. This would bring them to Market Reepham by about 7.30 A.M., whence a carriage could drive them

over to the Hall in about half an hour. Nine or ten long hours intervened till then, and, as Mr Freshener pointed out, all that could be done was to carefully tend and nurse Sir Carysfort through the night. It was just possible that unremitting care and the continual application of the remedies recommended might keep him alive till the following day.

It was arranged that Mr Freshener should remain with his patient all night. Lady Lezaire and Mrs St Evelyn, assisted by Mrs Leleu, the housekeeper, agreed to sit up with him also, and nothing could induce the devoted Podifat to go to bed.

That terrible night dragged itself slowly along. Fresh paroxysms and crises constantly supervened, but Sir Carysfort struggled bravely through them all. Towards dawn Lady Lezaire, worn out with watching and anxiety, dozed off to sleep. Mrs St Evelyn, although equally worn out, gently woke her mother, and begged her to lie down, if only for an hour.

"I will remain with dear Carysfort until you

have rested. You will be fresher then to see Sir Peregrine when he arrives."

After much entreaty Lady Lezaire reluctantly yielded to her daughter's earnest solicitations. Mrs St Evelyn also persuaded Hubert Podifat to retire for a time. Mr Freshener withdrew to the library, where a light supper was laid out for him, and for the moment Mrs St Evelyn was left alone with her brother.

Sir Carysfort seemed somewhat easier as the light grew stronger. The season was spring, the weather warm, and the chirping of the awakening birds was heard through the casements as they greeted the returning day. Sir Carysfort turned his lack-lustre eyes towards the windows, and made a feeble motion as if praying for more air. Mrs St Evelyn readily interpreted the unspoken wish, and threw up one of the sashes. The morning breeze came in, laden with the fragrance of a thousand blossoms, and for a moment Mrs St Evelyn leant out, as if seeking to fully realise their sweetness.

As she stood there, with her back to the room, she was suddenly startled by the pressure of a hand lightly laid upon her shoulder. Turning hastily, she saw that it was her husband.

"Oh, Ferdy, how you frightened me! I did not hear you come in."

"I was afraid of disturbing poor Carysfort, so I trod as lightly as I could. How is he?"

"Better, I think. He has been free from nausea for nearly an hour."

"But you, my dearest child, you must be nearly done up. How is it I find you all by yourself?"

"I insisted upon mother going off to bed, and Hubert has also just left the room. I am not in the least tired; I shall have plenty of time to rest by-and-by."

"You are a true soldier's wife, Rachel, and rise to emergencies. I never thought my quiet little woman would have come out so strong."

She turned up her face to his with the gratified gaze of a child who has been commended. It was a childish face still, with no great

strength or firmness about it—sweet, womanly, and confiding.

Colonel St Evelyn stooped his head and kissed her gently on the lips.

"Is there anything I can do? May I not share your hours of watching?"

"No, my dearest husband. The sick-room is not the place for a man. Besides, we shall want you to receive the great London doctor when he arrives. Come, Ferdy, be persuaded, and go off to bed."

Colonel St Evelyn passed his arm round his wife's waist, and again kissed her. Thus they approached Sir Carysfort's bedside, and together stood looking at his face. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be asleep, undisturbed for the moment by his late excruciating pains. Mrs St Evelyn parted from her husband at the door, and returning to her place sat quietly watching, ready to attend instantly to her brother's needs.

By-and-by Sir Carysfort awoke, and muttered almost unintelligibly a querulous demand for drink. A tumbler of lime-juice and water stood

by the bedside, and this Mrs St Evelyn applied at once to his lips. Sir Carysfort took a long draught, and again sank back on his pillow.

Another hour passed, and the Hall gradually aroused itself from the slumbers of the night. There were the usual sounds of feet hurrying along the corridors, bells ringing, and the general movements that showed the servants were astir.

Lady Lezaire was still in her room. Mrs Leleu, the housekeeper, who had shared the last night's watch with Mrs St Evelyn, had also retired to rest. Hubert Podifat was nowhere to be seen, nor Colonel St Evelyn. Rachel was alone in the sick-room.

From her now came a terrified summons to the household. The young baronet was much worse. A new paroxysm had supervened, and the old agonising symptoms had reappeared, enhanced fourfold.

"It is most extraordinary," said Mr Freshener, who thus characterised everything new in his experience. "And I understand, Mrs St Eve-

lyn, that until just now he seemed certainly better?"

"Yes," replied the baronet's sister, "Carysfort had been sleeping quite quietly ever since Mrs Leleu left him, and this is the first fit that has attacked him for several hours."

"It is most extraordinary," the country practitioner could only say; "I am quite perplexed."

"Oh! if the London doctors would only arrive! What, what, can detain them?" cried Lady Lezaire, in an agony of heartfelt despair.

CHAPTER II.

COLONEL ST EVELYN.

While the unhappy mother and sister are tending the sore-stricken lad, let us retrace our steps to a time antecedent by just a couple of years.

The scene is the *table d'hôte* of the Roches Noires, Trouville, in the height of summer.

The guests were of all nationalities. French predominated, of course, but there were representatives of almost all nations, Christians of every category and colour, their distinctive characteristics showing plainly through the somewhat uniform veneer of a common civilisation.

Table traits were no less clearly particularised than personal appearance. Here the French-

man chopped up his meat, then fed himself with his fork, as though he was still in the nursery, and could not be trusted with a knife; there the Teuton might with advantage have been deprived of an implement he seemed to mistake for a spoon, but which he handled with the skill of an Indian juggler accustomed to swallow swords. Aristocratic ladies washed their mouths out and spat in the finger-glasses; the use of toothpicks was by no means tabooed; napkins, having one end knotted and fastened into the collar, hung pendant like an infant's bib; greedy English youths piled up their plates with green peas, and then poured them like fluid down their ravenous throats.

Above all, above the jingling of glasses, the clatter of knives and forks, the racing to and fro of an army of waiters, rose the never-ending clacking of hundreds of tongues—a Babel of voices, French, German, English, in all varieties of idiom and accent—so inextricably mingled and confused that the sounds at a little distance might have proceeded from a menagerie full of

monkeys or a swarm of chattering magpies in a wood.

Among the rest, seated at the end of one of the long tables—the lowly places of the newly arrived—was a small party of English, unmistakable islanders; mother, son, and daughter, under the especial care of another, a good-looking, well-preserved, evidently military man, not exactly young, but hardly arrived yet at middle age.

The family party was that of the Lezaires: the mother, widow of Sir Percy Lezaire, a baronet of Thorpeshire, not long deceased; her only son, Sir Carysfort, a boy barely in his teens; and her only daughter, Rachel, a sweet artless maiden, budding already into womanhood.

Their friend and cicerone was Colonel St Evelyn, an acquaintance of not long standing, who had owed his first introduction to the timely succour he had afforded Miss Lezaire that season when in trouble with a runaway horse in the Row. Since then the acquaintance had

developed rapidly, quite into intimacy, which was still further fostered and encouraged by the sociable free and easy life of a French watering-place.

Colonel St Evelyn was a man of the world: he had seen much of it, and knew France, including Paris, particularly well.

Lady Lezaire found him a most delightful companion. Now, at dinner, he pointed out all the celebrities at table.

"That rather matronly lady, with the pretty childlike face? Madame Pornic—you must have heard of her—one of the cleverest actresses on the French stage, noted for her childlike innocence of manner—you can see it for yourself—ah! gives immense piquancy"—here the Colonel lowered his voice to a whisper, which only reached Lady Lezaire—"to the most *risqué* speeches. Proper? Of course, otherwise I should not have pointed her out to you."

"Who is that tall graceful woman there? How aristocratic she looks! One of the old *noblesse?*"

"Not quite. That is Madame Josse: her husband is the proprietor of the Grand Rabais, the great *magasins*, you know, in the Rue du Lac. He's enormously rich!"

"And, as usual, married rank?"

"Not at all. She was one of his *vendeuses*, a saleswoman, who had the good sense to play for the biggest stake. It furnished the plot for one of Zola's most successful novels—'Mademoiselle Ernestine'—you should read it."

"If you recommend it, I am sure it must be nice," said Lady Lezaire; "but I am a little afraid of French novels."

"I like French puddings," put in Sir Carysfort, his mouth full of a *parfait à la crême*.

"And I everything French," added Rachel, who was radiant with happiness. It was quite clear that she had looked forward to meeting St Evelyn, and was delighted that all had happened as she wished. Already one or two little tender asides had assured her of the interest that Colonel St Evelyn took in her,

and consoled her for the marked attention he was paying mamma.

For Colonel St Evelyn, like an old campaigner, was establishing himself firmly at the base of operations. He knew that if he was to win the daughter, he must first get the mother on his side, and he saw no better means of attaining this than by throwing himself at Lady Lezaire's feet.

Her ladyship, vain and self-satisfied, was rejoiced at the impression she had made. Colonel St Evelyn was a man of taste, who could appreciate her matronly common-sense, and see beauty in her mature charms. She accepted his attentions with cordial approval, and was already on the best terms with him.

They spent nearly all day together: in the evening Colonel St Evelyn took them to the Casino, where they sauntered through the gardens under the moonlight, or lingered in one of the *kiosques*, where the game of race-horses, the popular *petits chevaux* of every seaside place, was in full swing, and where

young Carysfort rapidly developed a passion for play. He backed the little horses wildly, and at first lost a considerable sum. Lady Lezaire's purse was, of course, at his service, and Colonel St Evelyn's experienced advice. Then luck turned, and the young baronet's pockets were rapidly filled.

"If Hubert were only here!" cried Carysfort, his eyes dancing with excitement and greed.

"And who is Hubert?" asked St Evelyn.

"A poor lad who lives with us at the Hall," replied Lady Lezaire. "He was a *protégé* of my poor dear husband's, who adopted him when deserted by his parents. They had been in his service, you know, and now Carysfort has taken such a fancy to him that at home they are never apart. I must say he is devoted to my dear boy in return."

There was something in Rachel's face, which Colonel St Evelyn watched constantly, that led him to suppose that Hubert was no favourite of hers. Anxious to know all he could of his new

friends and their surroundings, he took the first opportunity of questioning Rachel about this "Hubert." It was when they had entered the great ball-room of the Casino, and he had persuaded her to take a turn in a waltz.

"You do not seem to care much for Hubert, whoever he may be," he said, coaxingly. "He is very much to be pitied, I think."

"I am sure you would not like him either," replied Rachel, blushing at the implied compliment. "A common, ill-bred young man, not a fit companion for Carysfort. It is a great pity they are so much together."

"Does your brother go to Eton, or Harrow, or where?"

"Nowhere. He ought to go to school, don't you think? I have always said so, but mother will not listen to me. As it is, he learns nothing, and is always in the stables or the gun-room, hunting, shooting, or fishing, always with Hubert, and perpetually getting into mischief and bad ways."

"What a sensible little woman you are, Miss

Lezaire! I wish you would give me advice sometimes."

"You would not take it, perhaps, like mamma," replied Rachel, archly.

"Only try me," said St Evelyn, earnestly. "You cannot believe, I cannot well express to you, the deep value I attach to every word you say."

Rachel looked up at him shyly for one moment, then dropped her eyes quickly. There was a meaning in his great dark eyes, fixed on her with passionate regard, which she could not misunderstand.

Little Rachel was more than half fascinated already.

Lady Lezaire could hardly condescend to be jealous of her daughter, nor did she suspect as yet that any flirtation was in progress between Rachel and Colonel St Evelyn. But she had the woman's instinct that guesses a rival almost intuitively, and she could not refrain from passing a little unkindly criticism even on her own daughter.

"Children are a great deal of trouble to me," she said next day to the Colonel.

"They want a firm strong hand," replied the Colonel, sympathetically; "now your boy——"

"Oh! it is not dear Carysfort I am complaining of. Darling child! he never gives me a moment's anxiety."

She forgot that at that moment the dear child was in physic, French living having already rendered medical treatment necessary.

"I was thinking of my daughter: a girl like that is a great responsibility."

"Surely she will relieve you of it ere long. Miss Lezaire is so charming that she ought to marry soon and well."

"That little chit! Don't speak of it. Why, she is barely out of the schoolroom. So *gauche*, too, so awkward, so utterly unformed, that I fear no one will be taken with her."

"Pinafores and bread-and-butter are not every one's taste, certainly," said the deceitful Colonel. "Very young girls are most insipid, I must confess."

"Rachel is a child, a perfect child, in mind as well as in appearance. It will be years before she is marriageable—long after she comes of age, I expect."

"Miss Lezaire is still a long way off coming of age, I should think," remarked the Colonel, carelessly.

"Certainly; two or three years or more. Not but what she won't be her own mistress before she is twenty-one."

St Evelyn pricked up his ears.

"Her father," went on Lady Lezaire, "very unwisely, I think, and without consulting me, left it in his will that she should have her portion directly she married."

"With your consent, of course?"

"My daughter would not be likely to marry without it," said Lady Lezaire evasively, and in a cold constrained tone of voice. "But I hope she will not think of anything of the kind for some time to come. I quite dread it, I assure you."

"The responsibility is of course very great,"

said Colonel St Evelyn, seriously. "It is almost too much for a woman to bear alone."

"I feel it so, indeed; the burden presses me sorely at times."

"I should like——" St Evelyn paused, and Lady Lezaire looked down, seemingly expecting some tender confessions. "I should like," he went on—"I mean if at any time I can be of the least service to you; if my poor advice, my humble efforts, can save you from trouble and annoyance, dear Lady Lezaire, I beg of you to dispose of me as you please. You can count on my devotion; pray believe that."

"I do, most willingly and entirely; you would act as a true friend, I am sure." And Lady Lezaire gave him her hand, which he kissed with respectful homage, as though binding himself to obey her lightest behest.

CHAPTER III.

CARYSFORT'S GUARDIAN.

They were a very friendly and merry party in those days at Trouville. Colonel St Evelyn devoted himself entirely to the Lezaires, making himself acceptable to each in turn. Carysfort thought him an "A 1 chap." The Colonel took him to bathe every morning, and taught him to swim and tread water, and take headers off the splash-board into the great rolling waves that came in from the Atlantic when the sea was rough. They went off together on long fishing expeditions, carrying great prawn-nets, round the point towards Villerville, with their trousers tucked up above their knees. Every evening, at the Casino, St Evelyn helped the boy to bet

upon the race-game, and rather pandered to his propensity for play.

These constant attentions to her beloved boy would have been enough to have won Lady Lezaire's heart, but the Colonel made more direct attacks upon her. He kept himself always at her disposal; was ever ready to parade the plank-walks of Trouville when rank and fashion came out to sun themselves upon the beach; or was content to sit for hours by her chair on the sands, amusing her with gossip from London or Paris. He was always gay, always amusing, invariably deferential; yet he took care to invest the commonest phrases with a tenderness that implied the deepest admiration, tempered with unbounded respect.

Little Rachel, however, was the happiest of the whole party. Publicly, although always studiously polite, St Evelyn took no particular notice of her; only when they were alone together—and they had many opportunities for pleasant little *tête-à-têtes*—he made up for his coldness, and pressed his suit with all the vigour

of a younger man. They met for a moment or two in retired corners of the various saloons of the hotel, or on the balcony under the moonlight when Lady Lezaire had gone up-stairs; or more often still, at the Casino dances, where it seemed quite natural that St Evelyn should take her for his partner, seeing that there was no one else there she knew. After the first day or two, Rachel and St Evelyn quite understood each other: her heart, innocent, guileless, and trustful, had gone straight out to this the first man who had told her that he loved her. No wonder that Rachel Lezaire was so blithe and joyous at Trouville.

St Evelyn had not yet considered how best to obtain Lady Lezaire's consent and approval. He was content for the moment with the knowledge that he had succeeded with Rachel, the first and principal end after all. If she were only stanch and loyal to him, as he had every reason to hope, he felt confident that her mother might be won over in the end. But it would be wisest and best to watch and wait, to feel

his way carefully, and make the most of any circumstances or opportunities that might turn up in his favour. Meanwhile he made Rachel promise to whisper no word of their engagement to her mother or any one else.

In the third week of their stay at Trouville there came news at which Lady Lezaire was greatly upset.

"Mr Prendergast is dead," said Lady Lezaire, coming down on the sands after breakfast to where Rachel sat with Carysfort and Colonel St Evelyn.

"Poor dear old man!" exclaimed Rachel.

"I don't care," said Carysfort, in the same breath. "I hated him."

"For shame, Carysfort! Don't say such things. But it is most perplexing. I did not like him much I confess; he was never nice to Carysfort; still he did his best, and it will be difficult to replace him."

"What shall you do, mother? Whom shall you get?" asked Rachel.

"I can't think, I can't talk about it"—and

Lady Lezaire stood there in evident perturbation—now reading for the twentieth time a black-edged letter she held in her hand, now looking askance at St Evelyn.

"I fear I am *de trop*," said the Colonel, getting up from his chair; "you want to discuss family affairs. I will go for a walk and rejoin you by-and-by."

"No, no, Colonel St Evelyn, do not leave us. We shall, perhaps, be glad of your advice."

"It is heartily at your service, dear Lady Lezaire, as I have often told you before."

"I have just heard of the death of Mr Prendergast, Carysfort's guardian."

"I hated him," said the boy again—"cross-grained old beast! He wanted to send me to school."

"Do be quiet, Carysfort; it is quite too dreadful to hear you. Mr Prendergast was not all that could be desired, perhaps, but he did his duty, I believe, honestly and well. I only wish I knew where to find a successor."

"Oh, Colonel! won't you be my guardian?" cried Carysfort, impulsively. "That would be jolly, and you could come and stay with us at the Hall."

"You foolish boy!" said St Evelyn, laughing pleasantly, "you must not get such silly notions into your head."

"Why not?" observed Lady Lezaire, gravely, more in answer to her own thoughts than to anything that had been said.

"If I can help you, dear lady, in any difficulty," began St Evelyn; but he saw that Lady Lezaire, pondering deeply, and communing with herself, was not listening, so he wisely forbore to recommend himself further.

Rachel, whose heart had fluttered wildly at Carysfort's suggestion, which opened up a substantial hope that St Evelyn's suit might yet prove acceptable, said nothing. But there was a tell-tale blush on her cheek and a glad light in her eyes, which showed how eagerly she welcomed the idea of her lover's appointment as guardian. It meant his admission into the

family, and the speedy removal of any obstacles to their marriage.

Nothing more was said on the subject just then; but Lady Lezaire returned to it that evening as she and Colonel St Evelyn paced the Casino gardens alone.

"May I talk business for a moment, Colonel St Evelyn?" she began. "I have been distracted with doubt all day, hesitating and uncertain as to the right thing to do; but at last I have made up my mind—will you accept the guardianship of my boy?"

"Oh, Lady Lezaire!"

"It is a great deal to ask of you I know; the burden will be great, the responsibility heavy."

"I am not afraid of that, believe me."

"Carysfort's fortune is large, his minority must last for eight years more, and a long and onerous stewardship would be imposed upon you."

"I am ready to accept the trust, if you think me worthy of it. I can only promise to do my best."

"Of that I have not the slightest doubt; I think I can rely upon your loyalty and devotion: my son's best interests will be safe in your hands."

"Dear Lady Lezaire, you overwhelm me: how shall I express my deep gratitude for your good opinion? I am touched, deeply touched, by it; it encourages me to hope that ere long some nearer and dearer tie——"

"Do not talk like that, please," interrupted Lady Lezaire, whose vanity led her to misunderstand his words; but just at this moment, when anxiously concerned with her son's immediate future, the image of her dead husband occupied all her mind, and she could not tolerate addresses, for so she construed St Evelyn's language, from another man. "Let us think only of Carysfort to-night; by-and-by, perhaps——"

"Then you do not forbid me to hope?" said Colonel St Evelyn, taking her hand.

"I can't say—you must wait—we will see,"

said Lady Lezaire, greatly embarrassed, still satisfied that St Evelyn was thinking only of her.

Did the astute Colonel see her mistake? It could hardly be otherwise—her agitation, her confidences, must have told him that she took to herself the tender pleading that he meant for Rachel Lezaire. Yet he did not undeceive her, as he ought clearly to have done; but he feared Lady Lezaire's righteous indignation when she found herself disdained, and felt that it would lose him both the guardianship and all hope of winning Rachel's hand.

"It shall be as you wish," said St Evelyn. "What I have to say to you, dear Lady Lezaire, although of the deepest importance to me and my happiness in life, will keep for another time. We will stick to business to-night, if you wish."

"That will be better," said Lady Lezaire, with a little coquettish laugh. "Business first, pleasure afterwards. There is a great deal to talk

over, if you are to take the management of Carysfort's affairs."

"There is my hand on it," said St Evelyn, gravely; and after that an hour or more were fully occupied with business details.

CHAPTER IV.

IN LINCOLN'S INN.

Mr Prendergast's death, and the appointment of a new guardian, shortened the visit to Trouville, and necessitated a speedy return to town. The Lezaires occupied their house in Connaught Place, and the Colonel went back to his lodging in Bury Street. It was now the early autumn, and his club was closed for cleaning; but for the first time since he lived at it, St Evelyn was independent of the "Battle-axe and Banner." There was always a knife and fork ready for him in Connaught Place, and it was an "uncommon snug house to hang up your hat in," as he complacently told his friends.

Lady Lezaire, directly she returned to town,

informed the family lawyers, Messrs Harvey & Tinson, of the selection she had made of a new guardian.

"Have you known this Colonel St Evelyn long? The name is familiar to me," said Mr Tinson, who was now the principal partner in the firm: an attorney of the spruce man-of-the-world type, who prided himself upon his insight into fashionable life, and his acquaintance with every one in the West End.

"He is a distinguished military officer," began Lady Lezaire, "and belongs to the 'Battle-axe and Banner.'"

"I thought I knew him: a bold black-faced man, quite middle-aged, with a well-preserved figure."

"Not more than forty at most," interrupted Lady Lezaire.

"Dyes, I should say, and probably wears stays."

"What can his appearance have to do with his appointment as guardian?" again interrupted Lady Lezaire, this time with some spirit.

"Not much, of course," said the lawyer, looking keenly at his client; "he is a most engaging agreeable person, no doubt, and you of course are perfectly satisfied as to his character and qualifications for so important a trust."

"He is a gentleman; honourable——" Mr Tinson looked at her and nodded enigmatically; it might have been approval, or a suspicious distrust; "straightforward" — another nod; "well to do, with proper feelings, and very sensible ideas."

Mr Tinson, who had nodded at each adjective, now asked, "In business, or matrimonially?"

"How can you hint at such a thing!" exclaimed Lady Lezaire, indignantly.

"I would not presume for one moment to force your ladyship's confidence, and you will forgive me if I am wrong. But this somewhat sudden choice of a man whom six months ago you did not know—am I not right?—indicates peculiar grounds for your preference."

The lawyer again looked keenly at Lady Lezaire, who coloured slightly and cast down her eyes.

"Mr Tinson," she went on, after an awful pause, "you presume rather upon your position as solicitor to the Lezaires. I did not come here to consult you on any matter private and personal to myself, but to inform you of my appointment of a new guardian to my son."

"And I should be wanting in my duty, Lady Lazaire, if I did not tell you what I knew about him."

"You know nothing against Colonel St Evelyn, I am sure."

"I only know that he is to be seen at every race meeting. If you want Sir Carysfort to be brought up with a fine taste for racing—he is already very fond of horses, I believe—you can't do better than put him in Colonel St Evelyn's hands. The Colonel bets largely, I believe, and not always with success."

Lady Lezaire winced a little as she remembered Carysfort's rapidly developed passion for the race-game at Trouville, under the Colonel's kindly tuition; but she was stanch to her new friend.

"Colonel St Evelyn is not the only gentleman who amuses himself on the turf. I have no fears of his doing Carysfort any harm."

Mr Tinson waved his hands, as though washing them of all responsibility.

"If your ladyship is determined," he said, "there is nothing further for me to say. By the provisions of the late baronet's will, the choice of a guardian is left in your hands should a vacancy occur; and you have decided, of course after ample consideration, to take Colonel St Evelyn 'for better, for worse.'"

The application of this phrase from the marriage service annoyed Lady Lezaire.

"Mr Tinson," she said, "you forget yourself. Your remarks border on impertinence."

"I am sure I meant no harm"—there was a shade of mockery in this apology—"but now if you will favour me with your instructions, I shall be happy to carry them out."

Lady Lezaire, in a few brief words, ordered the necessary deeds to be prepared for the appointment of Colonel St Evelyn, and then, with

an air of dignified reserve, she bade Mr Tinson good morning.

"Well, of all the old fools," said Mr Tinson to himself, when he was alone, "commend me to a middle-aged widow who wants to marry again. She can know little or nothing of this man. He is no better than a needy fortune-hunter, addicted to gambling and heaven knows what else, yet she is ready to put herself and her son entirely in his hands. If she takes this Colonel St Evelyn for a husband, she will repent it to the day of her death."

A few days later, when the deeds had been prepared, St Evelyn called on Mr Tinson to sign them, and to be put in possession of the particulars of his new trust.

There was not much cordiality in Mr Tinson's reception: he was stiff and distant in his manner, inclining to be reticent and uncommunicative. The Colonel, who was cool and off-hand, talked pleasantly, but in rather a patronising way, as a man who was master of the position.

"I should be glad to know," he said, "the exact amount of responsibility I incur."

"It is a heavy one," remarked Mr Tinson, gravely; "the law is very strict with trustees and guardians."

Colonel St Evelyn would not take offence. "The law is not likely to fall foul of me; I have a wholesome horror of it and those who practise it."

"Thank you," said Mr Tinson.

"Present company always excepted, of course," laughed St Evelyn; "but perhaps we had better get on. The income from the Lezaire estates is large?"

"Upwards of £20,000 a-year," said Mr Tinson, stiffly.

"Of which I understand barely half is allowed for maintenance, the balance to accumulate during the minority? How, and by whom, are the accumulations to be invested?"

"By the guardian; but only in securities prescribed by the will."

"I shall see the will, of course?"

"If you insist; but is it necessary? I have noted here all the provisions that deal with the trust. You can hardly want to see the will."

"But I do. It is part of my duty. I hate to be in the dark. What nonsense, man!" he went on, in a more peremptory tone, seeing that the lawyer still hesitated; "can't I read the will for a shilling if I go to Doctors' Commons?"

"There is the will; you can read it here," said Mr Tinson.

St Evelyn took up the great parchment with its ponderous seals, and unfolding it, sat himself down to read leisurely. Now and again he made brief notes in a memorandum-book which he took from his pocket, and occasionally he addressed a few words of inquiry, seeking explanation of Mr Tinson.

"Thank you," he said at length, "I think I have mastered its contents; now I should like to run through the figures of the sums that have already accrued from savings over expenditure, so as to verify their investment according to the will."

"By all means, if you think it necessary; but your demand implies a certain mistrust."

"Not at all," said St Evelyn, blandly; "but it is right that, before assuming the trust, I should satisfy myself that everything is regular, and according to the conditions laid down."

"Here is a list of all the investments," said Mr Tinson, without further protest, "and this bundle contains the various share certificates. They are all railway scrip and debentures, except the £17,000 in Canadian 4 per cent."

"Quite right," said St Evelyn, after a minute examination of the various documents; "now we will just go into the leases of the Straddlethorpe farms, as well as the London house property. I should be glad to know how they are held, when any are likely to fall in, and the chances of improving our letting."

Another half-hour was devoted to the reviewing of these, the principal sources of the Lezaire revenue.

"It seems all quite satisfactory," said the Colonel, whose memorandum-book had been in

constant requisition throughout; "I only trust I shall discharge my stewardship equally well: my predecessor was evidently a thoroughly good man of business."

"Mr Prendergast always acted under our advice," said Mr Tinson, somewhat angrily, and with the air of a man claiming honour where honour was due.

"I shall be equally ready to avail myself of it," replied the Colonel, blandly, "although that will depend naturally upon how far I am satisfied with your conduct in our affairs."

"Harvey & Tinson have been solicitors to the Lezaires for generations," observed the lawyer, with rising indignation; "our best and most loyal endeavours have always been at the disposal of our clients. You, a comparatively new trustee and a perfect stranger to us, can hardly contemplate the severance of relations that have extended over more than a century."

"Pardon me, my good sir, it has always been my rule in life to take people as I find them: if you serve us faithfully, well and good; if

not, I shall advise my ward and Lady Lezaire to put their business in other hands."

"I consider such threats most unjustifiable!" cried Mr Tinson, hotly.

"Don't lose your temper, my good sir. I am perfectly satisfied with you at present, and hope, for your sake, I shall always continue so. But enough said; our business is ended for the present, I think, and I will bid you good day."

"Insolent, overbearing, hectoring, swaggering brute!" These were the epithets which Mr Tinson hurled after his departing client. "To dare to threaten me; to question our capabilities, and hint, rascally interloper, at breaking up the old connection with the firm! I will be even with him yet; I will keep my eye on him; he shall be held strictly to account for his stewardship; and after all, it can't last more more than half-a-dozen years or so. But the fellow's no fool, that's very clear. He has a very shrewd notion of business, and if he runs straight, will do well by the Lezaire estates. But does he mean to run straight? I wonder what his next move will be."

CHAPTER V.

LADY LEZAIRE GIVES WAY.

Colonel St Evelyn walked back from Lincoln's Inn Fields to his club, where he lunched with good appetite and well. They were proud of their mid-day buffet at the "Battle-axe," and its members declared it to be the best luncheon club in London. St Evelyn, who had a sharp eye to the *cuisine*, knew what to choose, and the *truite au bleu*, the *chaud froid* of pheasant, and the cunningly prepared Russian salad, washed down by an imperial pint of sound Chambertin, fortified him admirably for the next job before him.

Lighting a full-flavoured Reina, he set out westward, walking slowly and thoughtfully to Connaught Place.

"Her ladyship at home?" he asked the butler—an aged retainer, who sniffed a new master already, and was most obsequious to the coming king.

"No, Colonel. She 'ave gone with Sir Carysfort to give the dogs a run in the Park. But Miss Rachel's in the boodwarr."

St Evelyn took the flight of stairs to the half landing in three steps, and the next minute had his little lady-love in his arms.

"Oh, Ferdy, how you startled me! it's far too bad"—but there was no ill-temper in the blithe young voice—"no, really, you mustn't again."

"I have such good news, my pretty bird. I must show my delight," and he kissed her again and again.

"But now, Ferdy, be reasonable, do. Tell me exactly what has happened. Sit down, there: yes, there"—she insisted on his taking a seat by the fire, while she kept on a sofa far away.

"Well, I have seen Mr Tinson to-day, and

signed the deeds. So has Lady Lezaire, and, now the whole thing is settled and finished, there is no reason why I should not speak to her about—you know."

"When shall you do it, Ferdy? Not to-day? I feel so frightened. Suppose mamma should say No."

"She can't; I mean it won't much matter if she does."

"It would make me miserable not to have her consent. I could not go against her, Ferdy, never."

"But if she is obstinate—mammas have been so before now. What if she should object to me, should decline altogether to entertain my suit? Would you too send me away?"

Rachel hung her head.

"I could not bear to part with you, Ferdinand, not for ever," she said at length, in a low sweet voice.

"My pet! you will never give me up, I feel sure—my sweetest, best-beloved child! What have I done to deserve the priceless treasure of

your love?" cried St Evelyn, in tones that were rather theatrical, perhaps, but which conveyed no sense of their insincerity to her.

"Yes, Ferdinand, you may trust me indeed. I shall always be constant and true. I have given you my whole heart."

"Bless you, bless you for these dear words!" St Evelyn would no longer be denied, but crossed quickly to the sofa, where he again clasped her to his arms.

Sad that there should be an abrupt termination to so pretty a scene, but a harsh hoarse voice now fell suddenly upon their surprised ears. It was Lady Lezaire's: she had entered the room unobserved.

"What is the meaning of this?" she hissed out, almost beside herself. Rage, disappointment, wounded vanity, combined to make Lady Lezaire very terrible just then.

"It means that Miss Rachel Lezaire has promised to become my wife," said St Evelyn, in a cold, hard, determined tone.

"Never! It shall never be!" cried Lady

Lezaire, now livid with passion. "But I will speak to you directly. As for you, shameless minx, go to your room this instant, and stay there. Do not presume, do not dare to show yourself till I send for you. Go, miss, go!"

She turned then upon St Evelyn.

"And you—you call yourself a gentleman. False, perjured, deceitful villain! is it thus you repay my kindness, my, my——"

"Really, Lady Lezaire, I am utterly at a loss to understand. How have I offended you so grievously?" asked St Evelyn, with perfect self-possession.

"Did you not ask me—— Faugh! I cannot bring myself to utter the words. I cannot express my loathing, my contempt for myself."

"I am sure you are under some grave misapprehension, Lady Lezaire. If I can offer you any reparation, any apology, I am more than ready to do so. But you are mistaken —you are, I assure you."

"Have you forgotten that evening at Trouville, when you gave me to understand that,

that—— But no, it is too humiliating; I will not condescend to upbraid you."

"I repeat, you are altogether mistaken. What I said that evening I remember perfectly every word. But I was referring to Miss Lezaire, to whom even then I was deeply, passionately attached. I would have asked you formally for her hand that night, but you checked me. I do so now."

"My answer is ready for you: you shall not marry Rachel Lezaire. I will never, never give my consent."

"Is it needed?" asked St Evelyn, coolly.

Lady Lezaire looked at him in astonishment.

"Miss Lezaire is independent of you by her father's will."

"How do you know that?" asked Lady Lezaire, quickly.

"I had the will in my hands an hour or two ago at Mr Tinson's."

"I had forgotten, weak fool that I was to put you in that position; but it shall be undone.

I will not permit you to continue as Carysfort's guardian: my confidence in you is gone."

"I have no desire to occupy that position if I am no longer acceptable to you. I will give up the guardianship at once, but I will not surrender my claim to Miss Lezaire: we understand each other, and are both of one mind on this point."

"She is a silly foolish girl whom you have bewitched and beguiled. But she shall know you at your true worth before the day is out, and shall send you about your business herself."

"I will take a refusal from no other lips but hers. I have no fears, Lady Lezaire; Rachel is as true as steel."

"She does not know her own mind yet."

"Nor you mine. I am resolved, firmly resolved, to make her my wife, and what I say I'll do; you can't turn me aside from my purpose, nor, I think, will you succeed in depriving me of Rachel's affections: we can wait——"

"Can you! Not long then: why, already

you are old enough to be her father," interrupted Lady Lezaire, with a bitter laugh.

"I may remind you of the old proverb, replied the Colonel, imperturbably; "a man, you know, is as old as he feels, a woman as old as she looks: and believe me, dear Lady Lezaire, you might be Rachel's grandmother. Why vex and trouble yourself so! it only ages people prematurely."

"I declare, sir, your insolence passes all bounds. It would show better feeling, after what has occurred, if you were to withdraw from this house, in which you are no longer welcome."

Colonel St Evelyn rose from his chair and held out his hand.

"Come, Lady Lezaire, be more reasonable. I am grieved, deeply grieved at this misunderstanding, but I do not think I am to blame. Just consider. I was taken with Rachel from the very first, from that day that I stopped her horse in the Park; then I found that she cared for me a little, and you yourself were always so encouraging and kind."

"I gave you no encouragement: it is untrue, monstrously untrue!"

"You allowed me to be constantly with her, to pay her marked attention——"

"You never did pay her any attention that I saw; that's what I complain of."

"You see I am not very demonstrative, Lady Lezaire; but I was in love in my own quiet way, and then you yourself gave me so many marks of your kindly approval——"

"I? How? In what way?"

"Did you not offer of your own accord to make me your son's guardian? An honour quite unsolicited by me; I only accepted because I thought it was doing you a service, and because I thought your boy liked me."

He was still standing opposite her as he stated his own case, with an able, masterly kind of advocacy that was having its effect.

"Come, Lady Lezaire," he repeated, "let us be friends; won't you give me your hand?"

"You have behaved very badly to me, Colonel St Evelyn, that you must be ready to allow: I

cannot forgive and forget in a moment, nor shall I ever recover my confidence in you."

There was less acrimony in her tone, although she still seemed obdurate and angry.

"I am ready to make all the *amende* in my power. You shall find in me a most attached and devoted friend: I will labour strenuously in your son's interests, and protect them as my own. As for Rachel, her happiness shall be my first care; mine, I assure you, is wrapped up in this match. I am no longer in my first youth, and I can never love another girl in the same way. Do not, I implore you, refuse me her hand."

"I can't turn round all in a moment: it has been so sudden, such a surprise, I am so bitterly dis——" disappointed she would have said, but the admission was too bitter for her *amour propre*—"so disgusted," she went on, "at the deceit, the secrecy, that I hardly know what to say."

But St Evelyn took his leave in a sanguine state of mind; he flattered himself that Lady

Lezaire's bitter opposition was overcome, and that with a little persistence he would win Rachel's hand with Lady Lezaire's full approval, and without sacrificing his new position as guardian of her son.

So it came to pass: Lady Lezaire held out obstinately for a week or two longer, but she yielded at length to St Evelyn's unwearied attacks, and Rachel's pathetic entreaties, although the latter she never entirely forgave. She was not a little influenced in her decision by the fear of Mr Tinson's ridicule, who would have shrewdly guessed the reason had St Evelyn's appointment as guardian been cancelled. They were married that autumn, and Mr Tinson apologised for his suspicions when he found that it was Rachel and not her mother he was in eagerness to marry: nor could he either deny that St Evelyn had behaved well, for the Colonel had declined to have anything to say to settlements, and declared that every penny of Rachel's money should be absolutely tied up on herself.

The marriage came off without unnecessary delay, from Connaught Place, and the happy couple went abroad for a short honeymoon, intending to return and spend the rest of the winter at the Hall.

CHAPTER VI.

ARRIVALS AT THE HALL.

Lady Lezaire had several letters from Rachel, and was kept well informed of the movements of the newly married couple. No precise invitation had been issued to the St Evelyns, but it was understood that directly they returned to England they were to come down on a long visit to the Hall.

Their arrival was heralded by the appearance of Gibbings, the Colonel's man, who brought down the *impedimenta:* heavy baggage, guns, dogs, and horses. Of the latter there was a string. The Colonel was a hard rider when he got the chance, and the first use he had made of the funds marriage had put at his

disposal was the purchase of four sound serviceable animals, full of bone and sinew, well calculated to carry him forward with the Thorpeshire Hunt.

The Lezaire coachman, a grey-haired, cross-grained servitor, who had long been master of the horse in the limited establishment kept up by Lady Lezaire after her husband's death, sent in his duty and begged her ladyship's commands with regard to the Colonel's stud.

"Where be I to put 'em, my lady?" he asked testily. He had found Gibbings a little too free and easy—too ready to make himself at home, and take possession of the best quarters.

"Surely there's room enough. We've only got the carriage-horses, and the ponies, and Sir Carysfort's cob."

"I thought of the six-stall stable in the clock-yard——" the oldest, darkest, and least satisfactory part of the Lezaire stables.

"Very well; that will give two stalls to spare."

"But the Colonel's man, he beant over well pleased. He says that the hunters cost money, and that they ought to be in loose-boxes, and he wants the hunting stable."

This was a spacious addition made by Sir Percy Lezaire, when twenty years earlier he had hunted the Thorpe hounds.

"The Colonel's man will have to be satisfied with the accommodation provided," replied Lady Lezaire, angrily.

"Be the Colonel's horses likely to stand here long, my lady?"

"I cannot say: why do you ask?"

"Becos the six-stall stable's good enough for a few weeks; I should not like to keep valuable horses there all the winter."

"They'll not be here so long as that, Peters. Let them go into the six-stall stable. Those are my orders, tell the Colonel's man."

The coachman disposed of, the keeper came to know what was to be done with the Colonel's dogs. Three of them; they would disarrange the kennels. Sir Carysfort's setter would

have to turn out. And, by the way, was it likely any of the coverts would be shot over the next week or two? The Colonel's man had sent two breech-loaders into the gun-room, and had talked of a battue.

Lady Lezaire dismissed the keeper with a few brief words. Anger was in her heart against her son-in-law.

"He wants to take entire possession of the Hall, I think. He quite forgets he is only my son's and my guest."

But Lady Lezaire had not done with the St Evelyns.

Mrs Leleu was the next to remind her of the importance of the expected visitors. She wished for instructions as to the rooms she should give the St Evelyns.

"The blue suite in the south wing, I suppose?" suggested the housekeeper.

"Certainly not," said Lady Lezaire. "Why should they have the best rooms in the Hall?"

"I only thought that as it was a special occasion——" the housekeeper explained.

"There is nothing special about it. I don't see why my daughter should not go back to her own room; but I suppose that would hardly do now that she is married."

"Shall I get the pink-and-white room ready then, my lady? the windows look into the rose-garden, and the aspect is south-west."

"No; let them have the tapestry room. There is a dressing-room attached to it, and it is close to the back-stairs leading to the gun-room, — that will probably suit Colonel St Evelyn best."

The happy couple arrived as evening was drawing in. They were shown straight into the library, which was generally used at the Hall as a cosy snuggery in preference to the great drawing-rooms, and here Lady Lezaire received them with as much warmth as she could muster. She kissed her daughter, and gave her hand to her son-in-law, but spoke no cordial words of welcome.

"Will you have tea at once, Rachel, or would you like to go to your room?"

"I think I should like to go to my room first. Where have you put us?"

"The tapestry room would, I thought, be most convenient."

Rachel's face fell rather, but all she said was, "I suppose Bertram" (this was her maid) "will be there with the things by this time. Come up, Ferdinand, by-and-by!"

"All right, my love," replied her gallant husband; "I should like first to see after the nags. I suppose my man has arrived?" This was to Lady Lezaire.

"Certainly; he came down yesterday with four horses and a whole pack of dogs."

"Gibbings is a capital chap," said the Colonel, laughing pleasantly, and without seeming to notice any *arrière pensée* in Lady Lezaire's tone. "I suppose I shall easily find the stables?"

"One of the men will show you if you ring," said Lady Lezaire; and with that Colonel St Evelyn took himself off.

"Ah! here you are," said a fresh voice

cheerily, as St Evelyn passed out into the courtyard. "I'm jolly glad to see you. How is Rachel?"

It was the young baronet, who was as usual loafing about the offices and the stable-yard.

Colonel St Evelyn greeted him warmly.

"Carysfort, my boy, how goes it? Well met. Come along and see my horses. Do you know where they are put up?"

"Don't I just? I say, Colonel, it's a beastly shame,—they have given your horses the six-stall stable. Why, it's as damp as ditch-water, and a horse can't lie down in any of the stalls."

"Are you so pressed for room?"

"Room? There are not half-a-dozen horses in the whole place!"

By this time they had reached the stables, where Gibbings was in waiting.

"Halloa, Gibbings! is this the best you could do for us?"

"It wasn't my fault, sir. Peters, the coachman, said he had my lady's orders that they

were to come here. I told him we should want at least two loose-boxes."

"Where is Peters? Send him here at once."

The cross-grained, surly old coachman came haltingly, but the first sound of the Colonel's voice made him jump.

"Show me round the stables, will you? I am not going to have my horses killed if I can help it. Get a lantern, or have the place lit up."

St Evelyn fixed at once, with unerring quickness, upon the hunting stable.

"What horses stand here generally?" he asked sharply.

"It was built for Sir Percy's hunters."

"And what is it used for now? What horses stand here, I ask you? Come, look sharp!"

"There beant none just at this moment, but——"

"There will be in less than half an hour. Call some of the helpers, Gibbings, and bring my lot over here. I will come and see them bedded down myself by-and-by."

"I'm very glad you did that, Colonel," said Carysfort. "Peters is a cross-grained old beast; he thinks the whole place belongs to him, and mother always gives way."

"Of course it was all a mistake; but you see, Carysfort, I have paid a good bit of money for those nags, so I'm bound to look after them."

St Evelyn now went up-stairs to rejoin his wife, and found there had been another mistake, to call it by no stronger name. Mrs St Evelyn was having a warm discussion with the housekeeper when the Colonel came in, and he was surprised to find his gentle little wife speaking in so determined a fashion.

"You know, Mrs Leleu, I have always hated this room. I had rather have gone anywhere. It is so dark, and it looks into the courtyard."

"My lady chose it herself; it is no fault of mine, Mrs St Evelyn."

"What's wrong, my love?" asked the Colonel.

"Oh, nothing; only I do so hate this room. Mother has forgotten, I think."

"We'll arrange that by-and-by,—any place will do for to-night."

"But you might have reminded her, Mrs Leleu," went on Rachel, sticking to her point. "I am really very seriously put out!"

"There, there," said the Colonel, soothing his wife, "never mind now; we'll soon put this right."

"I assure you it was not my fault," repeated the housekeeper, and she left the room.

A very civil-spoken, plausible sort of person, but with rather a fierce look on her sallow, still handsome face, and in her large, dark-brown eyes, a suspicion of temper easily aroused.

"Your mother does not appear to be particularly anxious to make us at home, my dear."

"Oh, don't say that, Ferdinand; she is not really unkind, but she has never quite forgiven you, I think."

There were no secrets between husband and wife.

"I suppose that's it, but she might have

been pleasanter on our first day at the Hall. Why, she ordered my horses into a tumble-down place not fit for cows! But I soon made a change."

"Do you mean that you countermanded anything that mother had arranged?"

"Yes, my dear, that is what I mean; and to-morrow, if you will choose the rooms you prefer, I daresay your mother will give you them."

There was a set look about St Evelyn's eyes as he made this remark, which showed that he intended to try conclusions with Lady Lezaire.

CHAPTER VII.

A FIRST PASSAGE OF ARMS.

THERE was no discussion or contest between Lady Lezaire and Colonel St Evelyn till next morning. The first difference of opinion arose concerning Carysfort, and the future disposal of his time.

The Colonel had been studying the county map, and had discovered that the next meet of the Thorpe hounds was within very easy reach of the Hall.

"Would you like to go to Gerard's Cross?" (the meet) he asked Carysfort.

"Wouldn't I rather?" cried the boy, looking doubtfully at his mother.

"Dear Carysfort has never hunted," said Lady

Lezaire, in a cold, forbidding manner. "The risks are so great, that I have never liked to trust him."

"But he must begin some day," expostulated St Evelyn; "you cannot allow him to grow up without practice in the habits and customs of an English country gentleman."

"I have followed the hounds scores of times," cried Carysfort, "but only on foot with Hubert."

"Very *infra dig.* for the son of a M. F. H. But I suppose you can stick on a horse?"

"Can't I just?" replied the boy.

"And have you jumped a fence?"

Carysfort looked queerly at his mother before he replied—

"Dozens of times: my cob is 'A 1' at timber."

"He won't do for Gerard's Cross, though; you shall ride one of my lot. Sennacherib will carry you well; he is easy to steer, and has a light mouth."

"Carysfort shall not ride to hounds till he

is eighteen," said Lady Lezaire, decisively. "I absolutely forbid it."

"Please, don't say that, Lady Lezaire," the Colonel pleaded. "It will be too late for him then to get confidence or a proper seat. I will take the greatest care of him."

"Oh yes, mother, I must go. You won't be so cruel. I'm big enough now. Why, it's as bad as about the shooting."

St Evelyn looked as if he did not understand.

"Mother did not like Carysfort using fire-arms," explained Mrs St Evelyn.

"So she makes me have a safety gun—a thing with a false hammer, which you have to put in before you fire. When a bird gets up I have to fumble in my waistcoat-pocket, or ask Hubert or the keeper for the hammer, and when I get it I have lost my shot."

"You might as well try putting salt on a bird's tail," said St Evelyn, laughing heartily. "But all that can be easily mended."

"Never with my consent," put in Lady Lezaire, with increased severity. "I hate your

having anything to do with guns. They are always going off."

"Which I might suggest is what they are intended for," said the Colonel.

"I mean, going off unexpectedly. We hear constantly of such terrible accidents."

"Due to want of care, but more still to want of knowledge and experience. I am sure the very way to let Carysfort shoot himself——"

"Heaven forbid!" cried the anxious mother.

"——or some one else, is to give him no chance of handling firearms. He should get accustomed to them at once."

"I have my own views as to the education of my son," said Lady Lezaire stiffly, intending to end the discussion—"and I want no one to give me advice or teach me my duty."

"You don't know boys, my dear Lady Lezaire, so well as I do." St Evelyn laughed again, and good-humouredly. "I'm ready to back my plan against yours any day."

Lady Lezaire gave him a look of sour displeasure, but made no reply.

"Come, Carysfort, and look at the nags. You shall try Sennacherib, if you like, round the yard."

"You are a brick, Colonel—I like you," cried Carysfort; "and we'll have a talk with the keeper about the coverts. We might have a little pot-hunting, you and I, this afternoon."

"Carysfort, Mr Lewisham" (a neighbouring curate, who came daily to perform the thankless and unprofitable task of teaching the young baronet) "will be here in half an hour," said Lady Lezaire. "Have you prepared for him?"

But Carysfort was already out of earshot, bounding round St Evelyn like a dog just let loose from his chain.

They went out into the great courtyard, which was to the right of the drive and entrance to the Hall, and passed through this on their way to the stable-yards beyond. Suddenly Carysfort left St Evelyn's side, and ran off to slip his arm familiarly into that of another lad who was walking ahead of them.

St Evelyn came up with the two boys at the

doorway of the hunting stable. "This is Hubert," said Carysfort, by way of introduction.

"Oh!" remarked St Evelyn, carelessly, but he bent his eyes keenly upon the new-comer.

A slouching, slipshod youth, older probably than he looked: there was a strong line of black down upon his upper lip, indicating that he might be three- or four-and-twenty, even more, but his manner and appearance were those of sixteen. Round shoulders took from his height, which was about the medium; very small sharp features gave a childish look to a naturally small face. Straight, wiry-looking black hair straggled over a low projecting forehead, under which gleamed two black, shifty, restless little eyes, generally cast down, for their owner had a strong objection to look you in the face. His whole aspect—his loose, undecided gait, his shy, shrinking manner, his weak and constantly averted face, and his sullen and abrupt speech—was decidedly unprepossessing.

"Oh!" repeated St Evelyn, "and what is Hubert's other name?"

"Hubert Podifat is my name," said the youth reluctantly, as though the admission was likely to do him harm.

"And pray, what do you do with yourself by daylight?" went on the Colonel.

Hubert Podifat hung his head, and looked stupidly stolid, as though he did not understand the question.

"Hubert is my particular friend," said Carysfort, answering for him. "We go about together, fishing, shooting, hunting, ratting,—any larks. Hubert's up to everything, I can tell you."

"Is he?" said the Colonel, with rather a sneer in his tone; "but that will do for Master Hubert. Come, Carysfort, and look at the horses. We will have a saddle put on Sennacherib, and then you can try him."

Hubert Podifat slunk away, but he remained in the far corner of the yard while Carysfort and Colonel St Evelyn were together, and the moment St Evelyn turned to go back to the

house, he rejoined Carysfort with the eagerness of an inseparable friend.

The Colonel had been recalled by a message to the effect that Lady Lezaire wished to speak to him. He found her in the library with a flushed face. There was decided anger in her tone when she began. "Can it be possible, Colonel St Evelyn, that what Peters my coachman tells me is true?" she said,—"that you have taken upon yourself to alter arrangements I had made, and moved your horses into other stables?"

"It is perfectly true," replied St Evelyn, calmly.

"Then may I ask how you dared——"

St Evelyn interrupted her.

"One moment, Lady Lezaire," said he. "It is perhaps as well we should have an explanation. I should like to ask you at once whether you deliberately wished to put an affront upon me."

"I do not understand you."

"Has not your treatment of us since we

arrived been an affront — or worse? We come here as your guests,—your own daughter, and I, your son's guardian as well as your son-in-law,—and what do we find? Although the Hall is absolutely empty, you lodge us in the worst rooms in the house——"

"That is not the case," interrupted Lady Lezaire, hotly. "Rachel has been making mischief."

"Every one knows that the tapestry room, where you put us, is only used when the house is quite full; and you are well aware, Lady Lezaire, that the apartment is especially distasteful to my wife."

"I am mistress here, and I will put my guests where I choose," said Lady Lezaire.

"Quite so; but that does not remove the affront. Then as regards the stabling: there are no end of vacant stalls,—I saw them with my own eyes this morning,—yet you would have allowed my horses to run all sorts of risks in the very worst, the dampest, the darkest, and most unwholesome stable at the Hall."

"I never asked you to bring your horses down here."

"Pardon me! It was understood that I was to hunt, and I should never have presumed to look for mounts in your stables."

"You have taken a great liberty, I think, and I must insist that you will not again interfere with any orders I may give," said Lady Lezaire, hoping that the argument might now end. But St Evelyn had more to say.

"I should not dream of setting up my authority against yours, but I repeat that as Carysfort's guardian I am entitled to more consideration than I have received. It is very unpleasant to me to have to assert myself, but I feel that I am bound to do so if I am to take my proper place. I cannot look after your son's interests if I am to be treated as a mere cipher. You insist—so must I."

"What do you insist on?" asked Lady Lezaire, a little cowed by his masterful tone.

"On not being humiliated and made to appear small before all the servants and retainers.

I have not come down here as a poor relation, to pick up the crumbs and be satisfied with any small scraps of civility that you may throw to me. I claim to be of some consequence at the Hall, and I repeat I must insist upon being so treated."

"It is quite a mistake to suppose that I wish to affront you," said Lady Lezaire, now quite crestfallen. "I am quite ready, I assure you, to do anything in my power to make your stay pleasant."

"Thank you extremely, Lady Lezaire. I will take you at your word. Perhaps you will tell the housekeeper to move us into the blue suite in the south wing: as to my horses, I have seen to them already."

Thus, in her first engagement with her son's guardian, Lady Lezaire had tried to stand to her guns, but had been utterly worsted in the fight.

CHAPTER VIII.

HUBERT'S PARENTAGE.

Colonel St Evelyn was well received in the county. He came under the sponsorship, so to speak, of the Lezaires—a family long settled and much esteemed in Thorpeshire. Among the neighbouring magnates, too, were a few whom St Evelyn had met in London—either casual acquaintances of the racecourse, or fellow-members of his club, the "Battle-axe and Banner," with whom he was on something more than nodding terms. He got a good character in the county from the latter as a shrewd, sensible man of business, and this gained him the goodwill of the Lord Lieutenant, who at once placed him on the Commission of the

Peace. St Evelyn lost no time in appearing at sessions, and sat regularly on the bench; he freely offered himself for committees on jails, highways, lunatic asylums, anything and everything in which he might be useful, and his services were gladly accepted. He was soon known and appreciated as an excellent county magistrate, practical, fairly well informed, and never afraid of hard work.

The popularity he speedily won was, however, more particularly traceable to his thoroughly sportsmanlike character. One of his first acts on arrival at the Hall was the transmission of a substantial cheque to the Master as his subscription to the hounds. This was followed by his appearance in the hunting field, admirably mounted and turned out, at the very first meet after he came down; and from that time he rode well to the front on every possible occasion.

They liked this in the county. The Thorpe hounds were a little too near to town, and the neighbourhood was apt to be inundated by Londoners, who were often keener and better

mounted than members of the hunt. Thus any one who, like St Evelyn, was ready to maintain the sporting reputation of the resident gentry, was sure to be approved of.

Again, St Evelyn, who by degrees had established an ascendancy over Lady Lezaire which she was powerless to resist, had arranged several shooting-parties in the young baronet's name, at which the neighbouring squires were made free of the Straddlethorpe coverts in a liberal fashion that had long been unknown.

St Evelyn was generally voted a good sort of chap, a great improvement upon Sir Carysfort's last guardian, and a decided acquisition to the county.

Hospitalities were freely exchanged between Straddlethorpe and the houses around. The newly married couple were invited everywhere, generally to dine and sleep, after the fashion of country neighbourhoods, where it is a poor compliment to drag guests fifteen miles or more by cross-country roads to eat no better dinner than they could get at home.

On the other hand, Lady Lezaire was prevailed upon—although usually docile, she still resisted St Evelyn's influence at times—to entertain in her turn. The Straddlethorpe guest-chambers were once more refilled, and the best wine in the cellar—the '59 Margaux and the '34 port, so highly esteemed by local connoisseurs—was freely displayed after dinner.

Lady Lezaire was not always at great pains to be gracious, but the people who came to the house were mostly friends of long standing, and she could not be rude to them, however much she disliked the person who really brought them there. After all, Colonel St Evelyn, a self-possessed, experienced man of the world, was not likely to remain in the background, and the doing of the honours fell chiefly on him.

One day there was a large dinner-party at the Hall. The hounds had drawn blank that afternoon at no great distance from Straddlethorpe, and two or three men who were to stay at the Hall had ridden over there with St Evelyn. Young Sir Carysfort was with them.

On arriving at the stables, he had jumped off his horse and had run quickly across to where Hubert Podifat was standing, waiting for him, as it seemed. The boy slipped his arm into that of his friend, and they went off together in close confabulation.

"Who's that chap?" asked old Mr Etherly of Etherly—a hard-riding, red-faced country squire, who had lived all his life in the Thorpeshire country.

"A fellow called Hubert Podifat, or some such name," replied the Colonel. "I know nothing about him, except that he is far too thick with Carysfort Lezaire to please me."

"He's still hanging about here, then? How strange!"

"Who is he? Where does he come from? Do you know him?"

"Of course. Don't you? It was a great mistake, I always said, allowing him to run about the Hall. But Lezaire—Sir Percy, I mean,—the last baronet, you know—always took his own way."

"But, my dear Mr Etherly, you haven't told me who this Hubert Podifat is."

"That'll keep, Colonel. To-night, in the smoking-room, you shall hear. This place is too public."

Late that night, when old Mr Etherly had at least one bottle of '34 port under his belt, and was enveloped in the smoke of a full-flavoured "partaga," St Evelyn reminded him of his promise.

"Hubert Podifat," said Mr Etherly, rolling his cigar round in his mouth, "is the putative son of Podifat, who was under-keeper here in Sir Percy's time."

"Putative? Who was his real father, then?"

"No one knows for certain. But I never had the smallest doubt that the honour belonged to Sir Percy Lezaire."

"Can it be possible! And the mother?"

"There was the mystery. No one ever saw her, or heard of her even. Sir Percy must have kept his *liaison* uncommonly close. When Podifat came to live at Straddlethorpe—he had

the North Lodge—he was called a widower. He certainly brought no wife with him—only this one brat of a boy."

"Hubert?"

"Precisely. He was a rank blackguard, was Podifat, who had knocked up and down the world a great deal in his time—in America, Canada, everywhere—an idle, drunken, good-for-nothing rogue, who lounged in the alehouse all day, and was the secret ally of poachers by night. It was a wonder that Sir Percy put up with him for an hour. That was what raised suspicions, in fact."

"It was thought that the fellow had some hold over Sir Percy, I suppose?"

"Just so. You see Straddlethorpe in those days was as well managed a place as any in the shires, and Sir Percy would not have tolerated such a disreputable person as Podifat, not for an hour, if he had been able to help himself."

"But there must have been more reason than that for imputing the boy's parentage to Sir Percy."

"The notion was first put about, I believe, by the man Podifat. He was a garrulous, gossiping, scandalous scoundrel, and for a long time no one thought much of what he said. But the fellow was so persistent: his story never varied, and, to tell the truth, he spoke so plainly, that people began to think there was something in it."

"Particularly when taken in connection with Sir Percy's forbearance?"

"Exactly. Then something else cropped up to justify the first suspicions. Podifat went utterly to the bad. He was apprehended on a serious charge — night poaching complicated with manslaughter—and he left the country, not entirely of his own accord."

"As a convict, in fact?"

"As a convict: he was last heard of in Western Australia, but that was many years ago."

"Well?"

"The little brat—this Hubert, you know—was deserted, left to shift for himself. They found him half starved, a wretched little object,

in the empty Lodge, and Sir Percy at once had him taken in at the Hall."

"Was Sir Percy married then?"

"To be sure, and had been for some years. Rachel—Mrs St Evelyn, I mean—must have been four or five."

"And what did Lady Lezaire say to the appearance of Hubert?"

"Took it in excellent part, so we heard. Talked much of the kindliness, the noble philanthropy of Sir Percy, and was quite kind to young Hubert."

"Do you suppose she knew the real state of the case?"

"People are generally the last to know what interests them most. Anyhow she made no objection. Hubert was taken charge of by the housekeeper——"

"The present woman?"

"That I can't say, but I expect not,—it's so many years ago."

"And so the boy grew up at the Hall?"

"He became a kind of tame cat about the house—tolerated, but not much liked—until

young Carysfort began to grow up. He took an enormous fancy to the fellow, and it was never checked. Lady Lezaire——" (he paused, wondering whether he ought to take St Evelyn's mother-in-law to task) "ought not to have permitted it."

"I quite agree with you, my dear Mr Etherly. But, on the contrary, she seems rather to have encouraged the intimacy."

"Hubert Podifat is hardly a proper associate for Sir Carysfort Lezaire," the old squire admitted frankly.

"I feel that most strongly, and think the thing ought to be stopped."

"You won't find it easy, I expect."

"I'll do it, even if Hubert Podifat has to be sent away from the Hall. He is too old to be hanging about here, hand in glove with the head of the Lezaires."

"That's where you'll find the difficulty. Carysfort wont bear to part with him easily. However, I quite agree with you, Colonel, that the intimacy ought not to continue."

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT CAME OF A FIGHT.

Colonel St Evelyn thought that by freely offering his companionship to young Carysfort Lezaire, he would keep Hubert Podifat at a distance, and perhaps break the intimacy. But it is seldom that a grown-up man can make himself the close friend and ally of a lad in his teens, and ere long the boy chafed at his guardian's attentions. Carysfort often tried and often succeeded in giving the Colonel the slip, and instead of joining in some previously planned expedition, ran off to join Hubert Podifat, a more congenial associate.

One day St Evelyn came complaining to his wife of Carysfort's sudden disappearance.

"We were going over to Theobalds to see the kennels, and lunch with Lord Prudhames. But now, at the last moment, Carysfort is not to be found. It's too aggravating," said the Colonel, savagely.

"What can have become of him?" asked Rachel.

"He has gone off somewhere with that scamp, Hubert Podifat. Gibbings saw them together an hour ago."

"They have been friends for so long," pleaded Rachel.

"Hubert is a very bad friend, I'm afraid. I'm sure I've tried to do all I can for Carysfort. I am always ready to go anywhere, to do anything with him."

"Boys like some one more their own age. Not that I think you old, dearest," she added, hastily.

"You have given me the best proof of that, my love, by taking me—at the eleventh hour. But you must admit that Hubert is the worst possible companion for Carysfort."

"Of course; I have always said so."

"What I dread is some scandal. Hubert will lead your brother into mischief: they will get into trouble. But I'll find out what they're after to-day; of that I am determined," and he turned to the door.

"Are you going, Ferdinand?"

"I must ride over to Theobalds alone. We are expected to lunch, you know."

St Evelyn, when riding, liked to be followed by a groom, and as often as not he took Gibbings, a humble but long-standing friend. The Colonel, while still on the Lezaire estate, was in the habit of dismounting to examine fences or drains, or to go into cottages and do a little bailiff's work on his own account. Gibbings was with him this day.

"What's become of Sir Carysfort?" asked St Evelyn. "Have you any idea?"

"They went out Market Reepham way, Colonel. Up to some game."

"Have you any idea what?"

"I did hear there was to be a fight."

"A prize-fight?"

"Yes, Colonel. Some gipsies who have been hanging about these parts have matched one of their people against 'Burly Scran,' the brewer's man, and it was to be fought out this afternoon behind a low public-house—'The Case is Altered,' they call it—just outside the town."

"Do you mean to tell me that Sir Carysfort Lezaire has been taken by this Hubert to such a disreputable affair?"

"I am not certain, of course, Colonel; but that's what they were saying at the Hall."

Colonel St Evelyn determined to ride into Market Reepham from Theobalds, and under Gibbing's guidance he reached the public-house between four and five. The fight had come off in a paddock behind the house, and was over by the time the Colonel arrived. But most of the patrons of the nearly extinct science of self-defence still lingered in the tap-room.

Dismounting, and leaving his horse to Gibbings, St Evelyn walked straight in. A noisy and apparently quarrelsome company sat round

the dirty, beer-stained tables, discussing the episodes of the recent encounter, and arguing over another expected event.

"I'd back the young master here," said one rough voice, "for a pot."

"Go along wi' you," retorted another; "'tain't in nature that a slip of a chap like this should stand up with Long Pete."

"I'm not afraid of half-a-dozen Petes," put in a third voice, which St Evelyn immediately recognised; "I'll fight him for the pleasure of the thing."

"You're a good-plucked un," cried several of the roughs.

"Put down the stakes and make a match," said a fresh voice—Hubert Podifat's.

But now St Evelyn, pushing through the crowd, interposed.

"Carysfort! Can it be possible! You in this den, and in this state!"

Lady Lezaire would not have been proud of her son had she seen him now. Carysfort was lounging on a bench, smoking a short clay

pipe. In front of him was a quart-pot of ale, to which he had been paying close attention, as his flushed cheeks and dazed eyes proved.

"Fair words, master, fair words," put in the landlord of "The Case is Altered." "My house is as respectable——"

"We will see about that when the time comes for renewing your licence. You don't know me, perhaps?"

"It's Colonel Bloke," whispered one of the roughs to a neighbour. St Evelyn was already dreaded on the Thorpeshire bench.

"Come away from this disreputable place, Carysfort,—it's too disgraceful that you should have been brought here: but those who are responsible shall pay for it."

This was meant for Hubert, who sat scowling but apprehensive, like an ill-conditioned cur expecting a kick.

The young baronet got up reluctantly, and, hanging his head, followed his guardian out of the place. Gibbings gave him up his horse,

Carysfort clambered into the saddle with difficulty, and St Evelyn led him home.

Hubert Podifat did not return to the Hall till late in the evening, but he could not escape his punishment. A message came to him through Gibbings, that Colonel St Evelyn wished to speak to him directly he came in; and Gibbings, to prevent any mistakes, himself escorted the youth to the Colonel's sanctum.

This was a small room off the entrance-hall, which in Sir Percy's days had been used by the bailiff, but which St Evelyn had now appropriated. It was called "the Colonel's study," but it was rather a smoking-room and business room than a library. Books were altogether absent, with the exception of a local directory, two or three ledgers, 'Hutchinson on Dog-breaking,' and 'Youatt on the Horse.'

Hubert came in with the half reckless, half hang-dog air of a boy about to be birched. The Colonel, who was smoking in an arm-chair by the fire, looked at him fixedly for some

minutes without speaking, and without asking him to sit down.

"You ought to be properly ashamed of yourself," he said at last. "How dare you take Sir Carysfort Lezaire to that filthy pothouse?"

"It was he took me," replied Hubert, sullenly.

"I don't believe a word of it. It is you who lead, not that silly young fool. But there shall be an end of this: you will prepare to leave the Hall the first thing to-morrow."

Hubert looked at him stupidly, as though he failed to realise the meaning of his words.

"You understand? Pack your traps this very night: to-morrow you march!"

"Where am I to go?" Hubert asked, with a sulky scowl. He was beginning to understand.

"That's not so easy to settle. You're not fit to earn your living; but I have considered all that. I will arrange for you to be bound to Coppocks, the land-surveyors in Market Reepham, and kept until you are through your articles."

Hubert made no sign of assent or disapproval, but stood there looking as though he hated St Evelyn with his whole heart.

"Well, as you've nothing to say, you can take yourself off. Remember, to-morrow you leave the Hall."

Hubert Podifat slunk away to the housekeeper's room, where he found Mrs Leleu. She attacked him at once.

"This is a pretty time to show yourself! Where have you been all day?"

Hubert made no answer, but sat down, brooding and staring into the fire.

"Haven't you got a tongue in your head? Where have you been? Don't you want any supper? It's very late, but you can have something."

Hubert still sat mute.

"What's taken the lad? Are you ill? In trouble? What's the matter?"

There was more kindliness in Mrs Leleu's tone than might have been expected from her. She seemed to have a certain liking for this

ill-favoured dependant who occupied such a nondescript position at the Hall.

"I am going away," said Hubert, at length.

"Away? What! going to leave the Hall!"

Hubert nodded.

"Impossible! Of your own accord?"

"No; it's him."

The pronoun thus used ungrammatically referred to Colonel St Evelyn. The housekeeper quite understood this. Since the Colonel's access to power, he had come to be called simply "he" or "him" by the establishment, like the captain of a ship by his crew.

"The meddlesome, hectoring, hateful brute!" cried Mrs Leleu. "But what brought him on the top of you?"

Hubert briefly related what had occurred that afternoon.

"So you took young master to see a fight? Well! where's the harm? If it was good enough for you, it was not too bad for him."

"The Colonel hates me. He don't want Sir Carysfort and me to be together."

"Why shouldn't you be together? It's natural enough."

Hubert looked at her a little surprised.

"How so?" he asked.

"You'll know some of these days. Well, what are you going to do? Are you going to take your orders from him?"

"What else?"

"You are a poor creature! You have no more spirit than a mouse. If I was in your shoes, I would complain to my lady: I would see what Sir Carysfort had to say. You must show fight, d'ye hear?"

"What's the good? He's far too strong for us. How I hate him, the beast!"

"If you won't, I will. I'll have a talk with her ladyship the first thing in the morning. The Colonel shan't have it all his own way here. He may not find it so easy to get round me."

But Mrs Leleu was herself to have a passage of arms with the Colonel next day, a description of which must be reserved for a fresh chapter.

CHAPTER X.

THE COLONEL WORSTED.

It cannot be said that St Evelyn shirked the responsibilities or duties, as he saw them, of his position as guardian to Sir Carysfort Lezaire. He was ready to use his best energies and give up his whole time, if necessary, in the interests of his ward. Very soon after his arrival at Straddlethorpe, he had seen that the establishment required searching reform, and he had devoted himself *con amore* to the task. An active, energetic, managing man, with a leaven of administrative capacity, and a strong bias towards interference, he quickly asserted himself, and made his authority felt throughout the Hall.

They tried a fall with him—many of the old and reputed faithful servants of the Lezaires—but all were easily and often badly thrown.

The bailiff resented a too searching inquiry into the disposal of some of the crops: Colonel St Evelyn showed him that he was well up in the qualities of hay,—that he knew to a penny its market price.

The woodman wanted to give a manifestly cheap bargain to a Market Reepham timber merchant of some fallen trees: quite unexpectedly the Colonel called in an expert from the other end of the county, and had an entirely new valuation made.

Peters, the coachman, was near coming to conspicuous grief. The old man had never forgiven St Evelyn his defiance of my lady's arrangements with regard to the stables, and he was as uncivil always as he dared be to the new power at the Hall.

"Peters," said St Evelyn suddenly one day, "do you keep a forage-book?"

"Never heard tell of such a thing."

"You'll have to begin one directly. I must have a record of receipts and issues. And I'll take the buying, when anything is wanted, into my own hands."

"My lady has trusted me to buy everything these ten years past."

"I can quite believe it," said the Colonel, drily, "and the consequence is her half-dozen horses have eaten as much as a troop of cavalry. We'll put an end to that."

"I beant a-going to stop here if I'm not trusted."

"You can clear out when you please. But we'll have a settlement before you go, my fine fellow—remember that."

The Colonel looked so ugly and so magisterial as he said this, that Peters changed his tone. He became the most submissive of coachmen, ready to carry out implicitly any instructions.

It was the same all through the household, at least so far as the men were concerned. St Evelyn expected more trouble with the women,

or more exactly the head of the female department—for he wisely resolved to govern the other sex through the housekeeper, their responsible chief.

But before tackling Mrs Leleu, he fortified himself by speaking to Lady Lezaire.

"I am sure there is waste in the housekeeping," he had said.

"Is that an innuendo levelled against me?" Lady Lezaire asked, but with less indignation than she would have shown a month or two earlier. She was not so combative nowadays.

"Of course not," replied the Colonel, blandly. "I mean that your housekeeper is so entirely uncontrolled——"

Lady Lezaire laughed uneasily. This also was a covert insinuation.

"She takes so much upon herself, you understand," went on the Colonel, putting it in another way, "that I think her books ought to be looked into, her expenditure examined."

"I cannot see the necessity," Lady Lezaire protested. "Mrs Leleu has been here for four

or five years, and I have never had any fault to find with her."

"Did she come to you well recommended?"

"Naturally. I forget by whom at this moment, but of course she had an excellent character or I should not have engaged her."

"She may be as honest as the day, yet not careful. In Carysfort's best interests I feel convinced her accounts ought to be controlled."

"Mrs Leleu won't like it, I warn you."

"She will have the remedy in her own hands; she can leave."

"Would you go so far as that?" asked Lady Lezaire. "I should not like to lose her," she would have added, but the man's determined, masterful spirit frightened her.

"Why not? Discipline must be maintained."

But he did not find the housekeeper prepared to succumb without a struggle.

"You will be good enough to bring me the house-books every Tuesday morning to my study," he said abruptly to Mrs Leleu the

morning Hubert had been ordered to leave the Hall.

"Why should I show them to you? Lady Lezaire has never asked to see them all these years," replied the housekeeper, rather impudently.

"Because I tell you to do so," said the Colonel coolly, looking hard at Mrs Leleu. He met a pair of dark, defiant eyes, eyes as bold and black as his own, and a fierce face in which there were no signs of surrender.

"I shall only take my orders from her ladyship personally," said the housekeeper, with increasing insolence.

"The next orders you will receive will be to leave the house—if necessary this very day," went on the Colonel, with the air of a man who meant to hold his own.

"You want to turn everybody out of the house, Colonel St Evelyn. I have heard of your cruelty to that poor creature, Hubert Podifat."

"I think you had better mind your own

business, Mrs Leleu," said the Colonel, sternly.

"But you are not my master; I have never recognised you as such. I will see my lady, and hear what she has to say,"—and Mrs Leleu walked off, tossing her head.

She was the first person at the Hall who had resisted St Evelyn's authority, but she was not to profit much by her temporary triumph.

"You will have to do as Colonel St Evelyn tells you"—this was all the satisfaction she got from Lady Lezaire—"unless, indeed, you prefer to leave."

"I have been very comfortable here, my lady, and I don't like change. But it's a little hard to have a new master put over me."

"Everybody must give in to the Colonel. He is acting for Sir Carysfort, the real master."

"I don't think Sir Carysfort will like the last thing the Colonel's done."

"What do you mean?"

"He has sent that poor Hubert Podifat away from the Hall this morning."

"Sent him away? For good and all?"

"I saw Gibbings, the Colonel's man, driving him away in the tax-cart early this morning. Going to Market Reepham, I believe. Hubert is to be bound to Coppocks, the land-surveyors."

"And Sir Carysfort knows?"

"I don't believe it, my lady."

"I will see him as soon as possible, and settle what is to be done. But as to you, Mrs Leleu, you will have to give in to the Colonel or go."

It did not suit Mrs Leleu to leave Straddlethorpe Hall just then, and she preferred to make her submission to the autocratic mayor of the palace, who now reigned supreme. But if she yielded, it was with a bad grace, and she treasured up much resentment against St Evelyn in her heart.

Meanwhile Sir Carysfort, anxious to hear the end of the previous day's escapade, had been waking all the echoes with cries of "Hubert! Hubert!" They told him Hubert had gone to Market Reepham.

"What?—alone?"

"Gibbings took him over," said old Peters, maliciously. "I don't think Hubert's coming back to the Hall."

"What do you mean?"

"The Colonel has given him the sack."

"Hubert gone! Oh, what a jolly shame!" The boy flushed angrily.

"It's the Colonel's doing: he's master here now."

"We'll see about that. I chose him for my guardian, and I'm precious sorry for it. He thinks himself the Great Mogul."

Carysfort went open-mouthed to his mother, whom he found ready enough to listen to his grievances.

"The Colonel," he began, "I hate him! Oh mother, have you heard what he's done?"

"Mrs Leleu told me."

"But you won't let Hubert be kept away? I could never stand that. You'll speak to him, won't you?"

"Why has Colonel St Evelyn taken such a

dislike to poor Hubert?" asked Lady Lezaire, evasively.

"How can I tell? you had better ask him," said the boy, not choosing to confess the previous day's escapade. "But I won't stand this, and I'll tell him so to his face. Come along, mother, let's go and find him"—and the young baronet dragged Lady Lezaire rather reluctantly towards the Colonel's study, where they found him looking over a number of cigars.

"I say, Colonel, what a beastly shame to send off Hubert like that, without saying a word!"

St Evelyn ignored the boy, and addressed himself to the mother.

"You will, I am sure, approve of the step I have taken, Lady Lezaire, when I tell you what happened yesterday."

"I don't care," interrupted Carysfort; "it's a beastly shame, and I won't stand it!"

"I think when you consider, Colonel St Evelyn, how attached dear Carysfort is to Hubert Podifat," said Lady Lezaire, temporis-

ing, "you will agree that it would have been better not to take so decided a step. Hubert had better be sent for."

"I will never consent to that; he is ruining your son. Carysfort will be grateful to me some day for having broken this disreputable connection."

"I shan't!" cried Carysfort, rudely, "and I will have Hubert back! You're a beast, Colonel, a brute! you bully everybody here, but you shan't bully me. I am the real master, and I would sooner have Hubert here than you. I tell you he shall come back. I won't be contradicted,—I will have my own way. You are a beast, I say, and I hate you!"

Carysfort had gradually worked himself up into an ungovernable passion; but after he had delivered himself of this violent tirade, he threw himself on the sofa, and stormed, and kicked, and bellowed with rage. Lady Lezaire's anxiety now was all for her son: she strove to soothe and pacify him, and rang the bell for assistance. The housekeeper was called

in, and not without difficulty Sir Carysfort, who was nearly beside himself, was got away to his room. He continued in a state of hysterical excitement for some hours: the doctor had to be sent for, and sedatives administered. The boy was quieter and better towards evening, but his mother was terribly concerned, and in her heart greatly incensed against the Colonel.

She was too proud to make a direct appeal to St Evelyn, the justice of whose decision with regard to Hubert she could hardly deny. But Rachel tried to appease her husband, and the gentle little wife eventually talked him over.

Hubert's appearance at Sir Carysfort's bedside that same evening immediately restored the boy to health. Next day he was about again as usual, and more devoted to Hubert than ever. Colonel St Evelyn he studiously shunned, but when they unavoidably met, Carysfort's manner was surly and distant, and it was quite evident that the fight over

Hubert had completely estranged the young baronet.

Among the many enemies the Colonel had made at Straddlethorpe, none now hated him more cordially than the young master of the Hall.

CHAPTER XI.

COUNTY VEXATIONS.

Although Colonel St Evelyn had established himself pretty firmly at the Hall, his stay was not without its vexations.

It was not pleasant for a man of his masterful spirit to be successfully opposed. He had certainly got the worst of it with regard to the young baronet and his friend. Hubert Podifat had returned, almost triumphantly, to Straddlethorpe, and the Colonel felt that every one rejoiced at his defeat.

The unmistakable dislike Sir Carysfort now openly evinced was another thorn in the Colonel's side. It showed itself in brusque, often rude replies; sometimes in doggedly

silent contempt. For days and days guardian and ward were absolutely "cuts"; at other times they wrangled perpetually.

To be the object of constant undisguised aversion is nearly certain to evoke the same sentiment, and St Evelyn grew more and more piqued: any liking he had once for the lad presently disappeared.

Lady Lezaire was on her son's side, of course. She encouraged him in his defiant behaviour, and, gaining courage from her boy's boldness, permitted herself to be positively uncivil to St Evelyn.

Repeated very plain hints that he had outstayed his welcome at the Hall was one of many methods of showing their ill feeling.

"Why doesn't he go away?" Sir Carysfort would often ask. "He has been here long enough. I thought he only came on a visit, not to stay for years."

"Of course Rachel could not have been moved till quite lately"—a child had recently been born to the St Evelyns—"but now

that is safely over, there is no reason why they should not leave the Hall."

"I wish you'd tell him so. I hate the sight of him, and I know he hates me."

Lady Lezaire was not long in finding an excuse for conveying Sir Carysfort's views. The hint was a very plain one.

"Brooke Lodge is in the market," she said next day at the luncheon-table.

"Oh!" observed the Colonel, blandly. "And where is Brooke Lodge?"

"It's a charming little house the other side of Market Reepham, very compact and complete, and going quite cheap, I believe. You know it, Rachel, don't you?"

"Oh yes," replied her daughter, blushing. With a woman's rapid intuition she had already fathomed the meaning of Lady Lezaire's remark. "The Duboulays lived there, I think."

"Yes, and the Creichtons. You might ride over and look at it, Colonel," went on Lady Lezaire.

"I! Why should I? I don't want the thing.

I'm comfortable enough where I am," replied St Evelyn, with a brutal frankness that for the moment silenced Lady Lezaire.

The fact was, it by no means suited the Colonel's book to set up an establishment of his own. He was still secretly worried by his financial affairs. Although marriage had relieved him of many pressing anxieties, it had put no large amount of ready money at his disposal, and he had still a large balance of unsettled debts.

These he had hoped to pay off by degrees, by economies on the substantial income accruing from the investment of Rachel's portion, —economies made the more easy by his prolonged residence at the Hall.

Had he been more prudent, he might have seen the end of his troubles. But he could not resist the temptation to back the winner, and the winners of his choice had too often disappointed him. Within this year his settlements after Ascot and Goodwood had left him terribly to the bad.

Something stronger than mere hints were needed to dislodge him from Straddlethorpe. The old soldier liked his quarters, and knew when he was well off.

There were those who would have liked to have got rid of the Colonel, not alone from the Hall but from Thorpeshire. He had outlived his popularity in the county, and the more he was known the less he was liked.

He took too much upon himself, people said. He was too interfering, too busy, too ready to domineer, and manage everybody and everything his own way. Now he wanted to revolutionise the Highway Board, next the county asylum, then the county jail. Things went on quietly enough till he came into the neighbourhood; why could he not let them be? What if the jail was old-fashioned, dark, ill ventilated, on too small a scale? It had served for generations—for centuries even. Who was this Colonel St Evelyn—a stranger, an outsider, a new-comer in the country—who presumed to complain?

Antagonism and discontent rose to their highest pitch when he sought to foist a creature of his own, an old brother officer, into the governorship of the jail. Thorpeshire was tenacious of its county patronage: its appointments had been jobbed, handsomely, from time immemorial,—invariably given to some local candidate; whether the most competent and suitable mattered very little.

Yet St Evelyn managed to win the day. Active, indefatigable, uncompromising in his championship, an unwearied canvasser, he carried all before him. The election was closely contested. The county was split up into two hostile camps, party spirit ran high; but the Colonel's nominee was the successful candidate, and Captain Ruddock, formerly of the Royal Rangers, was duly elected Governor of the jail.

This success, and not strangely, embittered the feeling already hostile to Colonel St Evelyn. No one hated him more cordially than General Wyndham-Parker, who had been his most

strenuous opponent at the recent election. The General was a county man with a small estate heavily encumbered; not too affluent, therefore, and blessed with many daughters, one of whom had married his old aide-de-camp.

This gentleman, Captain Richards, now retired, had been a candidate for the jail governorship, and his defeat was taken in very bad part. The crime of it was of course visited upon Colonel St Evelyn.

A very lively discussion followed the election. Many of the magistrates who lived too far off to return home to lunch met at the Raven Hotel after their labours were ended.

"He's a sharp, sensible sort of fellow anyway," said Mr Etherly, who had supported the successful candidate, and was anxious to justify himself.

"You say that because you voted for him," remarked another, laughing.

"He's not a gentleman," said General Wyndham-Parker, a sharp-nosed, ferret-eyed, fidgety little man, who had once held a command, and

thought himself entitled ever afterwards to take the lead. It was intolerable to him that St Evelyn, so much his junior in military rank, should not bow before him. "How you could bring yourselves to choose a low-born, common cad like that——"

"At least he's sound in wind and limb," said Sir Archibald Bright, another of the opposition. The General's son-in-law was evidently a weakly creature, and this had really turned the election.

"I suppose that is aimed at Richards," retorted the General, fiercely. "If his health is indifferent, it was damaged in the service of his country."

"But the county jail is not a home for convalescents," put in old Etherly.

"At any rate, I don't envy the new man his billet," said Sir Archibald Milman, to turn the conversation.

"He won't be without friends," observed one of St Evelyn's side. "The Colonel will see he's not bullied."

"He may not be here always to stand by his

nominee," replied General Wyndham-Parker darkly.

"Why, what's to become of the Colonel? You won't get rid of him so easily."

"That's what my lady thinks. But he can't stay at the Hall for ever."

"Of course not. The boy is growing up: he will be of age in a few years. You don't suppose he will let the Colonel go on cadging then?"

"St Evelyn will have feathered his nest by that time."

"Or have turned the right bird out."

"I don't see how he's to do that."

"He's not a man to stick at trifles, you may depend," said General Wyndham-Parker, with bitter meaning.

"Oh! come, I say," cried old Etherly. "He's not half a bad chap. I don't think it's fair to make such remarks."

"No; but really," asked another, who had hitherto stood neutral, "what do you think made St Evelyn so keen about bringing this fellow in?"

"Public spirit, of course," replied a champion promptly.

"Public spirit be hanged! It's not that; it's his nasty, interfering, domineering ways."

"He wants a friend against the day he's sent to jail," cried the General, still angrily, determined to think all evil.

"Oh, I say, draw it mild! St Evelyn in jail! What in heaven for?"

"Well, to begin with, if there was imprisonment for debt nowadays, he'd be run in fast enough."

"Do you suppose he's really hard up?"

"He hadn't a sixpence when he married. And look at his tastes, all expensive: keeps any number of nags, dresses no end, smokes half-crown cigars."

"Then he plunges tremendously."

"Always ready to take or lay the odds."

"Or sit down to whist at five-pound points."

"Well, he goes the pace certainly; but after all, that's his affair. And he must have got a

good round sum with Rachel Lezaire. If it's nothing worse than debt——"

"You wait," said the General, sticking pertinaciously to his point. "There'll be something far worse than that one of these days, mark my words."

Every one laughed at this, no one more heartily than St Evelyn himself, to whom the whole conversation was in due course retailed.

But it will be readily understood that the Colonel's life was not altogether happy in Thorpeshire.

CHAPTER XII.

DOCTORS DO NOT DIFFER.

Let us return now to the sick-room where young Sir Carysfort Lezaire lay at the point of death.

"My boy! my boy!" cried Lady Lezaire. "Do tell me—are you in great pain?"

The only answer her son vouchsafed was to roll his eyes vacantly towards her.

"Oh, Mr Freshener!" went on the unhappy mother, "surely you are not quite helpless. Do something, anything, I implore you."

"I am most anxious, my lady, I assure you. As the stomach-pump is here, I will use it, for it is now past seven, and I expect Sir Peregrine or Dr Robinson every minute."

"Perhaps before they arrive my dearest son

will have succumbed. Do not, I beseech you, delay. Try and give dear Carysfort some relief."

The medical process which followed need not be described in detail. But Mr Freshener examined the result with considerable interest, and afterwards appeared more perplexed than ever.

To these poor bewildered creatures, the news that a carriage approached was welcome in the extreme. Mrs St Evelyn went to the window, and, opening it, looked down the drive.

"Is it empty?" cried Lady Lezaire, in a tone of the utmost concern.

"No," replied her daughter; "I can plainly see a figure inside."

"That must be Sir Peregrine. How good of him to be so prompt!"—and Lady Lezaire hastily passed down the grand staircase to meet the London doctor as he entered the hall.

She was forestalled, however, by Colonel St Evelyn, and when her ladyship reached the foot of the staircase she saw the retreating figure

of her son-in-law and Sir Peregrine as they went into the study.

They had closed the door behind them, and Lady Lezaire, although she at once followed, paused irresolute as if hesitating to enter. In spite of the sickening anxiety which oppressed her, she still yielded an involuntary submission to the man's stronger will.

The two men remained closeted together for some time—a period which seemed quite interminable to poor Lady Lezaire, but it was in fact something under a quarter of an hour. At length Lady Lezaire could brook no further delay. Going up to the door, she knocked nervously, and without waiting for an answer, entered the room.

"I really beg your pardon, Sir Peregrine."

The London physician looked inquiringly at Colonel St Evelyn.

"Allow me to introduce you," said the Colonel; "this is Lady Lezaire, the baronet's mother. She is naturally anxious, as you may

suppose, to have the benefit of your advice for her son."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Lady Lezaire; "but surely this is no time for compliments. I must beg you, implore you, to come up and see my son at once."

"Of course," replied Sir Peregrine—"that is the sole object of my visit. I was only asking this gentleman here"—and he waved his white hand blandly towards St Evelyn—"what were the facts of the case. It is quite impossible, you must understand, my dear Lady Lezaire, to arrive at a correct diagnosis without full information as to all the antecedents."

"Surely I could have told you all that better," again interrupted Lady Lezaire, with both petulance and indignation in her voice; "or Mr Freshener, our regular attendant, could have informed you better than any one else."

"Oh!" observed Sir Peregrine, as if a new light was breaking in upon him. "There is a general practitioner, then, in charge of the case?"

"Of course," replied Lady Lezaire; "he is up-stairs at this moment with my son."

"That being so, I had better join him at once."

Lady Lezaire led the way, and Sir Peregrine, with Colonel St Evelyn, followed. They found Mr Freshener seated by the bedside, but he rose on the appearance of the great leader of his profession, and made the profound obeisance which local obscurity likes to pay to metropolitan greatness.

"We were most grieved, Sir Peregrine," said little Mr Freshener, rubbing his hands, "to encroach upon your valuable time; but the matter seemed so urgent, and the case, I may say, so mysterious, that I felt it was imperative to get the highest medical skill."

"Have you arrived at any decision? Is there nothing in the symptoms to give you a line?"

"The symptoms are marked and plain enough. But they all point to a solution which I cannot but feel to be impossible and absurd."

"Kindly go over them," said Sir Peregrine,

knitting his brows and assuming that air of abstraction which implies acute mental effort.

A whispered colloquy followed: after the first half-dozen words uttered by Mr Freshener, Sir Peregrine visibly grew more and more interested.

"Why, it seems to me perfectly obvious," he muttered; "these are the plainest symptoms of——"

He paused suddenly and looked round. The word to which he would not give utterance formulated a very grave charge against some person or persons unknown. But with characteristic and professional caution he reserved his judgment until the fullest evidence was forthcoming.

No improvement had shown itself in Sir Carysfort's condition. His physical sufferings were extreme, but they were scarcely greater than the mental anguish of those who stood around. Presently the whispered conference between the two doctors ceased, and Sir Peregrine, having fortified himself with the local practitioner's opinion, proceeded to examine the patient for

himself. Lady Lezaire hung nervously upon his movements, and keenly scanned the doctor's sphinx-like face.

The examination ended, Sir Peregrine looked portentously grave, but vouchsafed no remark. A pause of some minutes followed, when Sir Peregrine himself broke the silence by saying to the other doctor—

"Mr Fresh——"

"Freshener, Sir Peregrine."

"I think I must speak to you in private," and the two withdrew to another room. Their conference was long protracted, and when they at length returned, Sir Carysfort seemed at his last gasp.

He was quite conscious as the end drew near. He knew his mother and sister, who each held one of his wasted hands. He smiled feebly at his friend Hubert, and spoke to all a few broken words of farewell.

The baronet appeared also to recognise Colonel St Evelyn, who came in at this the supreme moment, but gave him no greeting,

and seemed at first altogether indifferent to his presence.

He gradually grew weaker and more faint, and at length a species of comatose lethargy took possession of him, from which there appeared no prospect of recovery.

All at once, however, by a violent effort, he raised himself in the bed, and with wild haggard eyes pointed a finger at Colonel St Evelyn; then, with a half-uttered groan, sank back on his pillow and expired.

It was a most painful and terrible scene. Lady Lezaire, now completely unnerved, went into violent hysterics, in which her daughter out of sympathy presently joined, while Mrs Leleu, the housekeeper, who came in at the last moment, tried to soothe and pacify them. The doctors looked at each other like men who have a grave secret in common. Hubert Podifat threw himself on the foot of the bed and sobbed aloud, convulsed with a most poignant sorrow.

The only person who stood quite unmoved

was Colonel St Evelyn. He was the first to break the silence of that grim and ghastly chamber of death, and said to Sir Peregrine Falcon—

"Now all is over, it is needless to prolong this painful scene. Nothing remains to be done, I presume, but to pay the last tributes of respect."

"Pardon me," interrupted Sir Peregrine, "something very important remains. I consider that a *post mortem* is absolutely indispensable. Do you agree with me, Mr Freshener?"

"Certainly, Sir Peregrine, or I should withhold the certificate."

"Am I to understand, then," asked St Evelyn, "that you are in doubt as to the cause of death?"

"Not exactly in doubt," replied the great doctor; "we have more than a strong suspicion. But we wish to make assurance doubly sure."

"Suspicion! Can it be possible that you imagine there has been foul play?"

"Foul play is a strong term," replied Sir Pere-

grine, "and we make no accusations—only we must have well-substantiated facts."

"Your wishes are naturally law, and every facility shall be given you," said Colonel St Evelyn, in a somewhat constrained manner.

"It will be necessary also," put in Mr Freshener, "to give notice to the coroner, as an inquest must be held."

"Surely that is unnecessary—it will only cause a serious scandal in the county."

"The necessity will depend upon the result of the *post mortem*. But unless all our suspicions are completely falsified—unless, indeed, our whole knowledge and acumen have suddenly deserted us—I fear that, scandal or no scandal, a coroner's inquest will have to be held."

"As I am magistrate for the county," replied the Colonel, "it would ill beseem me to throw any obstacles in the way of executing the law. I myself will summon the coroner, although I repeat that I consider the proceeding rather uncalled for."

Sir Peregrine bowed gravely, but made no

further remark. He had not come a hundred miles from London to be taught his duty by a provincial justice of the peace. Mr Freshener sided with his professional leader of course, although in Sir Peregrine's absence he might have been overawed by Colonel St Evelyn's magisterial manner. The Colonel was a power at quarter sessions, and Mr Freshener, as surgeon of various county institutions, recognised the influence and authority of such an active local magnate.

This short and somewhat unseemly discussion was soon ended, and Mr Freshener, at the instance of Sir Peregrine, begged that the bedroom might be cleared.

"There were strong reasons," he said, in the most delicate manner possible, "for separating relatives so hastily from those well-beloved remains. But what the doctors had to do must be done without delay."

Poor Lady Lezaire was still almost stupefied by the sudden sorrow which had fallen upon her; but her daughter, although she scarcely

realised at first the meaning of this peremptory summons to withdraw, persuaded her mother to leave the room.

The two heartbroken women, with faltering step and dejected air, passed out together. The moment they had left the room, Lady Lezaire's strength seemed to forsake her. She tottered, and was on the point of falling to the ground, but strong arms interposed to save her. They were those of Colonel St Evelyn, who had followed her out of the room.

The mere sight of her son-in-law seemed to revive her flagging strength. With a sudden effort she broke from his arms and cried passionately—

"Do not touch me! You have robbed me of all I hold most dear in the world."

"Dearest mother!" exclaimed Rachel, "what do you mean by such terrible words?"

"Ask him—the husband you chose. Are you too great a simpleton to understand that he is now the absolute owner, through you, of everything here?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CORONER'S JURY.

The doctors remained closeted in the death-chamber for more than an hour. They were closely engaged upon their painful and unpleasant task, and when they issued forth, their habitual professional gravity had deepened to the darkest gloom. The faces of both showed that they possessed some portentous secret in common, not to be lightly or too readily divulged.

They came down the stairs together, both silent and preoccupied; but in the hall Sir Peregrine said to Mr Freshener—

"I will leave you, then, to make all arrangements. You will understand that time is of

the utmost consequence to me. I am wanted in London; my absence at this moment is of the gravest inconvenience to my patients and myself, and I must impress upon you the necessity for releasing me at the earliest, the very earliest, moment possible."

"You may count upon me, Sir Peregrine," replied the local doctor, bowing obsequiously. "My horse is at the door, and I will ride over at once to Market Reepham."

"The coroner lives there?"

"Yes, Sir Peregrine—it is the county town, and the headquarters of the police. They will have to be informed."

"Assuredly, and some magistrate. It may be necessary to issue warrants."

"The coroner's will suffice, if they find——"

"Well, well," said Sir Peregrine; "we must not anticipate the verdict, although my mind is perfectly clear. However, I will not detain you."

"I shall be back here in less than a couple of hours, Sir Peregrine. I will beg the coroner

to impannel a jury at Market Reepham, and we will all come over together."

"Thank you, that will be the best. I think now I shall beg them to allow me to retire, and get a little rest."

A servant was called who found the housekeeper, Mrs Leleu, and Sir Peregrine was shown to a bedroom. Dr Freshener then mounted his horse and rode off to Market Reepham.

For a couple of hours the Hall remained perfectly still and quiet, with blinds close drawn, a house of deep mourning. Lady Lezaire had shut herself up alone with her grief; Mrs St Evelyn had also retired, after vainly attempting to comfort her mother. The Colonel was in his study, where no one dared to intrude upon him.

He was looking out of the window with a depressed and gloomy air, when the appearance of a couple of flies, followed by a heavy lumbering omnibus, which he recognised as belonging to the Lezaire Arms at Market Reepham, surprised him, as they were

driven rapidly up the avenue towards the house.

"What have we here?" he muttered. "I wonder whether those doctors have done, and what has become of them?"

All doubt of the meaning of the approaching vehicles was dispelled when they first pulled up, and a superintendent of police jumped out, followed by a short, stout man with long grey whiskers, carrying a black bag.

"Why, it's Chibnal, the coroner! Then there is to be an inquest, and these, I suppose, are the jury."

The next minute he was in the hall, receiving the arrivals.

"Very painful, most unpleasant affair," said little Mr Chibnal, deferentially. He had always been a little afraid of the Colonel.

"I had no idea there was to be an inquest. Who summoned you?" asked St Evelyn, briefly.

"Dr Freshener, the poor dear young baronet's own medical man."

"The result of the *post mortem* was not altogether satisfactory then?"

"You must not ask me that. I know nothing except what is deposed before me in the open court. Where had the inquest better be held, Colonel?"

"In the gun-room, I should think; there is plenty of room there for the jury and all—a parcel of greasy, dirty ruffians," he said to himself, as he turned away to give the necessary orders.

"The superintendent will arrange all that, and collect the witnesses. Meanwhile, gentlemen" —this was to the jury, who still hung doubtfully and apologetically about the entrance-hall —"we will view the body if you will follow me; Dr Freshener will show us the way."

A little later the inquest was formally opened, and the first witness, Sir Peregrine Falcon, was called. This was a tribute to his eminence, and in deference to his wish to return to London without delay.

His evidence was startling, and terribly to the point.

"I was summoned," he said, "from London, and arrived here at 8 A.M. this morning. The deceased was suffering from grave symptoms, the cause of which I was at first unable to explain, but longer and closer examination satisfied me that they were due to an irritant poison."

Every one in the room, coroner, jury, and police, started at the word, and many ejaculations of surprise and horror followed.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, pray do not interrupt the witness. You said, Sir Peregrine——"

"I said that I was convinced the deceased had been poisoned. I had no doubt of this, but I felt that an autopsy was desirable—anticipating your wishes in this respect, Mr Coroner."

"You did perfectly right, Sir Peregrine Falcon. I am obliged to you for your promptitude in assisting the law."

"The *post mortem* examination was made by Dr Freshener and myself, with the result I fully anticipated. We discovered traces of poison in the viscera, more particularly in the liver."

"And the poison was——?"

"Arsenic."

The jury looked at each other with grave, scared faces, and the little coroner, no less perturbed, pulled himself together with the air of a man determined to do his duty, however unpleasant.

"Was the poison present in any large quantity?" asked the coroner.

"No."

"Then it may have been accidentally taken."

"That is as may be," said the great doctor, "but you must not take it for granted that the quantity discovered in the organs was all that the deceased had swallowed."

"How do you mean, Sir Peregrine?"

"I mean that the action of arsenic is to produce violent retching, during which the poison would be more or less thrown off."

"Was that the case here?"

"I expect so, but I have no proof of it. There was much vomiting, but I regret to say, I much regret to say, the product was not pre-

served. Had that been done, I think there is no doubt we should have discovered arsenic in it."

"Why was it thrown away?"

"That I can't tell you," said Sir Peregrine, shrugging his shoulders.

"Carelessness?"

"That or——" "something worse," Sir Peregrine would have said, but he checked himself like a prudent man, hesitating to make accusations.

"I gather from what you have already told us, Sir Peregrine, that the deceased in your opinion did not poison himself. Can you throw any light, then, upon the manner in which the arsenic was administered? How, or by whom?"

"I have no doubt that it was administered more than once: the recurrence of the worst symptoms at certain intervals would indicate that. But as to how or by whom administered, I am really unable to enlighten you in the least."

"I feared so," said the coroner. "The point is one of the deepest importance, but we must seek information elsewhere."

After this Sir Peregrine was allowed to withdraw, and Dr Freshener was called in. The local practitioner's medical evidence naturally corroborated Sir Peregrine's, but the coroner hoped he would have something to say upon the points his colleague had left in the dark. This was evident from his first question.

"You were called in to the case at its commencement, I believe?"

"Not quite, but at any rate Sir Carysfort had not been ill for more than an hour when I arrived."

"He was in bed?"

"Yes; he had gone to bed directly he was attacked."

"By whom was he attended?"

"By his mother Lady Lezaire, Mrs St Evelyn his sister, and the housekeeper Mrs Leleu."

"Were any of them alone with him at any time?"

"Not to my knowledge—at least, not in the first part of the night; but as it grew later, they took it in turns to sit up with him."

"We have been told that certain grave symptoms recurred at intervals: can you tell us who had been nursing him when they showed themselves?"

"Not very correctly or distinctly, I fear. Those symptoms appeared after each of the ladies had been in the room."

"Were they the only persons who had access to the sick-room?"

"Oh no; the young man, Podifat, was often in the room—in fact he could hardly be persuaded to leave his young friend; and Colonel St Evelyn came and went frequently." There was a pause.

"You have told us that you arrived about an hour after the illness first declared itself: the deceased was conscious when you arrived?"

"Yes, perfectly. He spoke to me, describing what he felt."

"Did he offer any explanation—suggest any cause, I mean—of the violent pains he suffered?"

"No, although I entreated him to do so if he could. I asked him how he had been spend-

ing his day,—whether he remembered eating anything likely to disagree with him; but he always shook his head, and declared he could not understand why he was so ill."

There was not much more to be got out of Dr Freshener, nor indeed from any one else. The inquest sat for several hours, and examined nearly every one in the house. Lady Lezaire, out of deference to her sorrow, was excused, and the jury agreed with the coroner that her evidence was not indispensable. Great pains were taken to get at the bottom of the mystery, but a mystery it remained to the last—a mystery, that is to say, as to how the crime had been committed; but that there had been a crime, no one who heard the evidence had a shadow of doubt.

The coroner's jury did not hesitate to give their opinion plainly. They found that Sir Carysfort Lezaire had met his death by poison; but as to how or by whom the poison had been administered, there was no evidence to show.

CHAPTER XIV.

FURTHER INQUIRY.

It was a case of wilful murder: no one in Thorpeshire had a doubt of that. Sir Carysfort Lezaire had been murdered, poisoned wickedly and secretly in his own home, by some person or persons unknown.

The news spread through the county quickly, creating immense excitement.

Who had done it—and why? This was the question that every one asked, and every one wanted to solve. There must be an inquiry, every one was agreed.

But what was everybody's was nobody's business. The days slipped by, yet nothing was done. At length several of the magnates

and leading magistrates put their heads together, and it was decided, after consultation with the chief constable, to employ the police, the details being left to the chief.

Lady Lezaire had been much more prompt. The moment her first paroxysm of grief had subsided, she had communicated with Mr Tinson of Lincoln's Inn Fields. The presence of the family lawyer was indeed necessary at Straddlethorpe to regulate the affairs of the succession, and it was only right that he should attend the young baronet's funeral.

Mr Tinson's first visit on arrival was to Lady Lezaire, with whom he was closeted for more than an hour. Thence he went to his own room, where a message was brought to him that Colonel St Evelyn would like to speak to him at once.

The Colonel received him in his study.

"It is only by accident, Mr Tinson, that I have learnt your presence here," he said, rather stiffly, to the lawyer, as he motioned him to a seat; "you might, I think——"

"Lady Lezaire sent for me, and naturally I went straight to her," interrupted Mr Tinson.

"That was right enough. You are, I suppose, her legal adviser, while you are not necessarily mine, or rather my wife's."

Mr Tinson instantly became more civil.

"I should, of course, have come to pay my respects, Colonel St Evelyn, and to take any instructions."

The lawyer knew that Colonel St Evelyn, through his wife, was now the master of Straddlethorpe, and he had no desire to lose the legal business of so fine a property.

"I have no instructions. It would be indecent to talk about business so soon. I was only complaining of the want of courtesy you have displayed in not coming to see me."

"Nothing of the kind was intended, I assure you. Lady Lezaire had much to say to me, so I went to her first."

"How she hates me, that woman!" cried St Evelyn, emphatically; "I can't for the life of me think why."

Mr Tinson looked at him curiously.

"Lady Lezaire was wrapped up in her son."

"Well, is not Rachel, my wife, her daughter? We are both of us ready to devote ourselves to Lady Lezaire, to make up to her somehow for the grievous loss she has sustained. But she keeps Rachel at a distance, and won't see me at all."

"So I understand."

"Did she tell you so?"

"I think, if you will permit me, I will not repeat anything that occurred at my interview with Lady Lezaire. She is my client, as you say, and lawyers, like doctors, are bound to be silent."

"It is quite impossible, if this continues, that we should go on living together. We can hardly remain under the same roof."

"Do you mean that you wish to leave Straddlethorpe?"

"Is it our place to leave? To whom does Straddlethorpe now belong?"

"I had forgotten," said the lawyer, bowing,

"for I could not bring myself to believe that Mrs St Evelyn would wish to turn her mother out of doors."

"Nor does she—yet. For the present we are going away. It would be most painful to remain here under the circumstances."

"That I can quite believe," observed Mr Tinson, drily.

"After this terrible heartbreaking accident," went on Colonel St Evelyn.

"Accident!" cried Mr Tinson, in evident surprise at the expression.

"Certainly accident. I have no doubt in my own mind that poor Carysfort met his death through some shocking imprudence. He was always running wild about the country — of course I have much reluctance in saying this of the poor dear boy, but it is the truth. He was here, there, and everywhere with his friend Hubert Podifat, and he must have picked up, somewhere or other, the stuff that proved fatal to him."

"But unless I am mistaken," protested Mr

Tinson, "the verdict of the inquest, backed up as it was by the clearest medical evidence, declared that he had been poisoned by arsenic. Now arsenic, you must admit, is not to be picked up anywhere. You would not find it easy, Colonel, to buy arsenic."

"I! why should I buy arsenic?"

The two men looked fixedly at each other. But Colonel St Evelyn's eyes did not quail before Mr Tinson's piercing gaze.

"But I am not so fully convinced, as you appear to be, that arsenic was the cause of death."

"You can't get over the verdict, and Sir Peregrine Falcon's opinion. It's the highest in the medical profession."

"Pshaw! doctors have been wrong before now, and Falcon admitted that the quantity of poisonous matter discovered in the intestines was extremely small. No; I shall not be easily persuaded that there was foul play. Something more tangible must be elicited, and I do not see at present how it is to be obtained."

There was an accent of interrogation in his speech, so Mr Tinson thought, which put the suspicious lawyer on his guard.

"Do you propose to institute an inquiry?" was his evasive reply.

"I do not see the least necessity for it: does Lady Lezaire?"

"The subject is far too delicate to be touched on at present with her ladyship. At least I should not like to mention it to her; perhaps she will broach the subject to you."

"I tell you she will not see or speak to me. But if she wants to do so, it must be soon."

"You think of leaving the Hall, you say?"

"Yes; directly after the funeral we shall start for the seaside for two or three months. After that, we shall return to establish ourselves here, and I take this opportunity of informing you that we hope to have the Hall to ourselves."

"Is that intended as a message for me to convey to Lady Lezaire?"

"It is. She is a client of yours, as you say, and as she chooses to have no communication

with me direct, I cannot do better than speak to her through you."

"When do you wish me to tell her this?"

"Oh! not immediately, of course. You had better wait a few days, till after the funeral, or till we are out of the place. Thank you; that is all I have to say to you, Mr Tinson. Business, as I told you, will keep." And the Colonel showed Mr Tinson the door.

Sir Carysfort's funeral was very largely attended. Every one of position in the county came in person or sent his carriage. All the servants at the Hall, Hubert Podifat, most of the tenants on the estate, and many of the tradesmen from Market Reepham, followed.

Colonel St Evelyn represented the family, as chief mourner, much against Lady Lezaire's wish, indeed in spite of her. But there were no relatives, near or far; the baronetcy was now extinct, and but for the son-in-law the Straddlethorpe carriage would have been empty.

A solemn and decorous gravity, as became the occasion, sat upon the face of the man who

was really heir to the deceased. But there were no symptoms of very keen sorrow, and his demeanour was cold and repellent to the few who approached him in the churchyard and after the ceremony with expressions of sympathy. They were few, these friends, and he might see for himself, if he looked round at this great county gathering, that public opinion was against him.

Within a day or two the St Evelyns left the Hall. It was then that local gossip, fed by vague but increasing suspicion, took more practical shape. The Colonel's hasty departure was exaggerated into disgraceful flight; and it was decided, as has been said, to make further inquiry into the circumstances of Sir Carysfort's death.

CHAPTER XV.

THE POLICE AT WORK.

On the same day that the St Evelyns left, Mr Tinson drove over to Market Reepham in a fly ordered from the town, to meet the afternoon express from London. He was waiting on the platform when it disgorged its half-dozen passengers, and he seemed to have no difficulty in recognising the person he wanted amongst the number.

"Ah, it's you, Faske! I'm glad they've sent you down," was his greeting of a thick-set, quietly dressed man, with sharp eyes and a determined face.

"Well, as you mentioned my name, Mr Tinson, they could do no less at the Yard," replied

the other, rocking his head slightly, as though to balance a rather too loosely-fitting hat on the top of it; "but I shan't be able to stop in these parts long."

Mr Tinson's face fell.

"You see we're so busy just now. Them Irish are giving no end of trouble, and I'm in that Clerkenwell job. But surely you've got some of the locals at work?"

"The chief constable has been told by the justices to pick out a young fellow to take charge of the case, and I've just seen him. But nothing has been done yet."

"What like is he? Where is he? Young, you say? Any gumption? I don't care much for boys with short police experience. They're so cocky—had no failures, you see, and think they can teach us old hands their work. But where is this young chap? We'd better have a confab without more loss of time."

"He's at the police-station waiting. Shall we go round?"

In a few minutes more they had been intro-

duced by the chief constable to a young man—he looked like a young gentleman—of pleasant address and excellent manners.

Alfred Earswick, as he was called, had studied medicine, and had taken his diploma, but he had not fallen on his feet as regards practice. After a hard struggle for existence, he had turned his back on his profession and joined the police. He had entered as a common constable, just to get bread, but he had hopes that his superior education and general aptitudes might some day give him advancement in county or borough police.

In appearance Earswick was tall, and rather awkwardly put together. He had a small head for his height, with straight, sandy, reddish hair, which he parted in the middle, and wore rather long. Under pale straw-coloured eyebrows were a pair of small but piercing and very mobile grey eyes. He had a slight moustache of the prevailing tone of his hair, but lighter, and a very large mouth plentifully stocked with brilliant white teeth, which he

showed a good deal. No one could call him handsome, yet he was not exactly plain, and his face lighted up pleasantly when he talked.

"You are already well up in the case?" asked the chief constable of the London detective.

"So far as it has been published—nothing more. Is there anything to tell? Have you come upon any new facts?"

The latter part of this speech was addressed to the young local detective.

"I have only to-day been instructed to act. I am still quite in the dark as to the whole affair," answered Earswick.

"You've read the report of the inquest, I suppose?" said Mr Faske, rather contemptuously.

"No; I cannot say that I have. But that won't take long. I think you have it, sir," he said, addressing the chief constable.

While the young man read his brief, Mr Faske nursed his left leg and consulted his shoe-string, as his custom was.

"The first thing in all these cases, according

to my idea," he said at length, with the air of a man who had reason to be proud of his ideas, "is to look about and consider who is likely to be most benefited by the crime, if crime there has been."

"As to that there is not the slightest mystery. Sir Carysfort Lezaire's death benefited one person very considerably," said Mr Tinson, promptly.

"Yes? To whom do the estates go?"

"To the sister, Mrs St Evelyn."

"His sister!" A shade of disappointment crossed Mr Faske's face. "It is hardly likely that *she* could have committed the crime."

"Certainly not. No one would think of accusing her—a sweet woman, a little weak perhaps, but no other fault. It is her weakness that brings her so completely under her husband's subjection."

"Her husband is living, then?"

"Very much so."

"What sort of character does he bear?

Does he live in these parts? Who and what is he?"

"I cannot answer all these questions at once," said Mr Tinson with some hesitation, and looking at the chief constable to help him. "Captain Bracebridge here has known him—Colonel St Evelyn, I mean—nearly as long as I have."

"I? Oh, don't ask me! I have nothing to say against Colonel St Evelyn," protested the chief constable with evident reluctance.

"Hang it all!" cried Faske; "why this beating about the bush? I must know all you know——"

"We *know* nothing," said both almost in a breath.

"Well, all you think. You must make a clean breast of it always to the police as you would to a doctor. Come."

"For my part I am possessed of only the vaguest suspicions. But I wish to keep nothing from you—don't imagine that."

And Mr Tinson told the detective everything he knew about St Evelyn and the Lezaires.

He began with the Colonel's appointment as guardian; went on to the marriage; then described the stay at the Hall, and the Colonel's behaviour there; his masterful arbitrary ways; the quarrels with the young baronet, and the hatred engendered; last of all, he recounted the closing scenes of the poor lad's short life.

"You say the Colonel made light of the last illness?"

"Distinctly. He laughed at the necessity for calling in a doctor; he opposed Lady Lezaire's sending to London for Falcon; when Falcon came, St Evelyn kept him as long as possible from the bedside."

"Had the Colonel access to the sick-room?"

"Continually."

"Alone?"

"There is nothing to show that, but it is highly probable."

"Other people went into the sick-room, of course?"

"Naturally. But why suspect any of them? The mother and sister; the housekeeper, a

neutral person; a young fellow, the baronet's most devoted friend,—were they likely to do the deed? Why should they?"

"Mrs St Evelyn might, under her husband's compulsion."

"Impossible. You would say so if you knew her."

"And the others—of course I exclude the mother—had no interest in the baronet's death?"

"The only people who benefited by it were the St Evelyns."

Mr Faske was silent for a time.

"Then you believe the Colonel administered the poison?" he said suddenly to Mr Tinson.

"I never said so," replied the lawyer quickly.

"No; but you plainly implied your belief. Do not be afraid of sticking to it. Frankly—I quite agree with you."

"I knew you would," cried Mr Tinson, delighted.

"But you have no proof—not the slightest proof," interposed the chief constable.

"For that we must depend upon our young

friend here," said Faske patronisingly, as he put his hand upon Earswick's shoulder. "We must send him into the enemy's camp."

"To the Hall?" asked Earswick.

"Certainly. Are you afraid? The Colonel won't eat you. Besides——"

"The Colonel's not there; he left this morning."

"Gone? Abroad? Yes? Do you mean to tell me you Thorpeshire police have let him slip through your fingers like that?"

"He has only gone to France."

"France! Pshaw! There's extradition with France. You'll hear of him next in Sweden or in Spain—somewhere beyond the reach of a warrant. Yah! Fancy that!"

It is impossible to express the London detective's disgust. He promptly gave up nursing his leg, and jumping to his feet strode up and down the room.

"To bolt would be to give up all profit from the murder. Would he do that, do you think, and while he still believes there is no evi-

dence against him?" suggested the chief constable.

"There's something in that," said Faske, becoming more calm.

"Whether or not, the mystery ought to be unravelled," put in Earswick, who was all eagerness to get to work. "The proofs should be forthcoming, the case prepared. Fearing nothing, he will no doubt return one of these fine days, and then——"

"You're right, young man. We must proceed with the inquiry, so far as it will go—at least you must, Mr Earswick. So prepare to take up your quarters at the Hall."

"Shall I go openly?" asked the young police officer.

"Are you known there?"

"I don't think so. But some of the servants may have seen me in the town here at Sessions' time."

"It will be better to remain incog. You will be freer, and may get your information easier," said Faske.

"How shall I disguise myself?"

"What will be best, Mr Tinson? Can't we get him in without exciting suspicion?"

"He could go as my clerk," replied the lawyer. "The change of ownership must lead to lots of work: taking inventories, sorting papers, and so forth. It would be quite natural for me or one of my people to be constantly at the Hall."

"Of course Lady Lezaire would have to know," suggested the chief constable.

"Is she safe?" asked Faske, anxiously.

"As any of us. Lady Lezaire will only too gladly help the law. She would be truly rejoiced, I feel sure, if the real murderer met with his deserts."

"Can you make up like a lawyer's clerk, Mr Earswick?" was Faske's next question.

"Why not? Wait half an hour, and tell me if you know me, or would take me for anything else."

The man who by-and-by returned to the police office bore no resemblance to the young detective.

It was a lantern-jawed, lank-haired, middle-aged man, dressed untidily in rusty black, with a wisp of white neckcloth and crumpled linen. His hair, his eyebrows, and his moustaches were dyed black, and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles hid the brightness of his inquisitive eyes.

"That will do first-rate," said Faske, approvingly.

"You're not a clerk to be proud of," added Mr Tinson, with a laugh. "But I've seen fellows like you. Come along. I'll give you a blue bag and some bundles of papers, and we'll drive straight to the Hall."

"Stay," said the chief constable to his subordinate. "How are we to communicate?"

"By post. There is a letter-box just at the Lodge gates," said the lawyer.

"Remember you must post everything yourself, and be careful; cautious and cunning, that's your motto. But use both your eyes and your ears."

This was Faske's parting advice as the detective followed Mr Tinson into the fly.

CHAPTER XVI.

EARSWICK *ALIAS* QUELCH.

The day was closing in when Mr Tinson and his clerk reached Straddlethorpe. They were shown at once into the library, the room appropriated by the lawyer, where Mr Quelch, for so Earswick was to be called, waited while Mr Tinson had an interview with Lady Lezaire.

"Everything is settled," said the lawyer, by-and-by. "Lady Lezaire thoroughly understands. As my clerk you will have every facility, Mr Earsw——"

"Quelch, you mean."

"I beg your pardon, Quelch. You will use this room for business during the day, take your meals in the housekeeper's room, and

sleep in the servants' wing; in fact, have the run of the whole place."

"It'll be odd if I don't run up against something soon. I'd like to begin at once. May I ask you one or two questions?"

"By all means. Go on."

"The servants here—do you know anything of them?"

"Very little. This is my first visit to the Hall for some years."

"That was the butler, I think, who let us in? Long here?"

"I think not. He is only a lad, as you saw. Put in by the Colonel, I believe, who said the old man made too free with the port."

"The coachman?"

"He is a very old servant, I know, and has stood his ground, although the Colonel was pretty rough on him."

"Had the Colonel a man of his own?"

"Yes, Gibbings by name, an old soldier. Looked a smart little man, although I never spoke to him."

"Gone with his master?"

"I really cannot say. You'll easily find out."

"And this housekeeper; if I am to live at her table I shall see a good deal of her. It is as well to be prepared. What of her?"

"I only know her as a superior sort of woman. Civil-spoken, rather a foreign appearance, dark eyes, pale face, self-possessed, with a determined look about her."

"Been here long?"

"Half-a-dozen years, I believe."

"Not a nominee of the Colonel's, then?"

"Certainly not. I have heard they had several tussles at first."

"But she is still here?"

"I suppose she gave way."

"A wise woman. But she's not likely to love the Colonel all the same. If I can only get her to talk."

But it was not so easy to make Mrs Leleu talk. When the lawyer's clerk, Mr Quelch, made his way to the snug room the housekeeper called her own, he found a table liberally spread

after the Thorpeshire fashion for "high tea." Mrs Leleu received him civilly, and pressed him to partake of the many good things provided—the cold goose, the ham-and-eggs, the pressed tongue, the potted beef, and the half-a-dozen dishes of sweets—but this hospitable duty performed she lapsed into silence, answering his many questions by monosyllables or not at all.

"Here's diet for a hungry Londoner," he cried.

No remark.

"I don't often sit down to such a spread."

"Ah!"

"Won't you be tempted with a slice of tongue, or a little goose?"

"Thank you; no."

"Of course: I see. Sad time this; can't eat. But you should, you should, or you'll lose strength."

"You were very fond of him, I suppose?" Mr Quelch inquired feelingly, trying another line.

"Who?"

"The young master; the poor young fellow that's gone."

Mrs Leleu nodded.

"So sudden too! Only ill one day, I hear. Only twenty-four hours!"

"Twelve."

"Dear, dear! how sad! And the cause, the real cause, no one knows?"

"I don't."

This was not encouraging, but Mr Quelch would take no rebuff.

"Ought we to have begun?" he continued, pointing to a third place, still empty, at table. "You're expecting some one else?"

"No one—to speak of. Young Podifat," replied Mrs Leleu, briefly and ungraciously.

"Oh!" The lawyer's clerk had not yet heard of Hubert Podifat, and he was wondering to whom Mrs Leleu had referred thus disparagingly when Hubert himself slouched into the room and flung himself into a chair near the window.

"Now, manners," cried Mrs Leleu, peremptorily.

Hubert's head was sunk low between his shoulders, and his ungainly body lay half collapsed in the seat.

"Come to the table and eat your tea," went on the housekeeper more angrily; and with a sulky half-silly air the youth presently complied.

"Who's that chap?" he asked with his mouth full, nodding towards Mr Quelch. "What's he doing here?"

"Speak more civilly. A friend of my lady's." Mrs Leleu looked ashamed of Hubert's rudeness, and as if to turn it off, began talking with the lawyer's clerk.

"How long have you been with Harveys?"

"Harveys?" Mr Quelch did not seem to understand.

"Harvey and Tinson's — your employers," said Mrs Leleu. "Don't you know their names?"

"We always speak of the firm as Tinsons," replied Mr Quelch readily.

"Still do business in the same place?" went on Mrs Leleu.

"Oh yes." The answer was put, but in his heart Mr Quelch cursed his carelessness in forgetting to ask Mr Tinson his office address.

"Essex Street, Strand?" Mrs Leleu inquired, carelessly.

How should he answer? While Mr Quelch paused in cautious doubt, Hubert blurted out—

"Mr Tinson's place is in Lincoln's Inn Fields. I've heard Carysfort say so."

Had Mrs Leleu laid a trap for him? If so, why? Did she suspect him to be other than he pretended? He feared so, from the angry way in which she took up Hubert.

"See here; don't poke yourself into other people's talk, Hubert Podifat, or you may go short at supper."

"I shall have to be on my guard with this woman," said Mr Quelch to himself; and he

soon left the table to rejoin Mr Tinson in the library.

"Mrs Leleu?" said the lawyer, in answer to his clerk's suggestion that the housekeeper seemed suspicious. "Only inquisitive. All women are. But I'm not much afraid of her. It's Gibbings you must be careful with, the Colonel's man; he's still here, I find."

Mr Quelch saw nothing of Gibbings that evening, but Mrs Leleu was waiting to show him to his room.

"I hope you'll be comfortable here, Mr Quelch," said the housekeeper, holding up the lighted candle while he lit his own. "My lady wished it. Anything we can do? One of the maids would have unpacked your valise for you, but it was locked."

"Thank you," said Mr Quelch, producing his keys. "But I always prefer to do that myself."

"Good night, then, Mr Quelch. Our regular breakfast is at eight, but you can choose your own time. I think everything is all right here," and she waved the candle round, ending the

movement close to Mr Quelch's face. "Good night."

"That woman's on the alert for some reason or other; but I trust I'm a match for her."

And with this consoling reflection Mr Quelch turned into bed.

He was up with the lark next morning; the bright summer's sun aroused him early, and he was glad to be out and about before the whole house was stirring.

A very short toilet sufficed. He tumbled into his clothes, gave one look in the glass, one touch with the hair-brush—of the greasy black pomatum sold as infallible by the Market Reepham hairdresser—to renew the freshness of his glossy black curls, and then he was ready.

When he returned an hour or two later to dress more carefully, he had explored the greater part of the grounds; had learned how the land lay, the position of the offices, stables, and so forth, and had looked through the principal rooms on the ground-floor, still in the hands of the housemaids.

To his surprise he found his own bedroom

door ajar. He thought he had locked it. At any rate, he had put away the tell-tale hair-dye; at least he was sure of that.

They were making his bed, he supposed. A figure, a female figure, was stooping over it as he entered, and a second glance satisfied him it was Mrs Leleu.

At this moment the housekeeper, unconscious of Mr Quelch's return, came from the bedside. She was moving towards the window, and closely, minutely examining the pillow she was carrying as she went.

Mr Quelch instantly knew why. His heart gave a great jump, and he realised that his secret was in this woman's hands.

The pillow-case was marked and stained with greasy black patches just where the sleeper's head had lain.

"You should have worn a night-cap," said Mrs Leleu with killing sarcasm, as she looked up and saw the culprit.

"I ought, I admit, and in future I will. I feel very foolish, Mrs Leleu. My vanity has been properly exposed."

"Vanity! Was it only that?" She spoke with scornful disbelief. "No, no; I know better. You're not what you pretend."

"But I assure you——"

"You let the cat out of the bag yourself last night. I saw then your hair was dyed. Who are you? One of the police?"

"I am Mr Tinson's clerk."

"So's my grandmother. You're wasting breath and time. Why not make a clean breast of it? I might help you."

"My real name is Earswick, I belong to the Thorpeshire constabulary," the detective confessed, after a very short pause.

"And you are here to get evidence to make up a case against, against——"

She seemed to shrink from mentioning the name.

"Against the person most strongly suspected. Do you know whom I mean?"

"Yes, yes." She hissed out the affirmative with the intense energy of personal hate. "Colonel St Evelyn. It is he; he did it, the

murdering, black-hearted villain that he is. He did it : only he."

"How do you know? Can you tell me anything—anything that will justify arrest, that will help us to convict?"

"I don't know. I may, perhaps. We shall see. But we'll hang him yet—hang him as he so richly deserves." Again fiercest hate gave ghastly meaning to the terrible threat.

Earswick—we will so know him—remembered what Mr Tinson had said of the enmity between Colonel St Evelyn and the housekeeper. No doubt Mrs Leleu might be useful.

"You promise your help, then?"

"Yes ; if I have a chance. But you may rely at least upon my holding my tongue. No one shall know who you are through me. But mind others don't find you out."

"No fear ; I shan't be caught twice."

"Be on your guard—with Gibbings in particular. He is devoted to his master, so keep him at a distance if you can."

CHAPTER XVII.

TAYLOR'S 'TOXICOLOGY.'

After breakfast Earswick had a few words with Mr Tinson. The lawyer was on the point of starting for the station to catch the morning express.

"Oho!" he said laughing. "So Mrs Leleu has penetrated your disguise. Sharp woman. But it don't much matter, and she may be of use. What are your plans?"

"I hardly know; beyond this——that I must hunt up what I can against the Colonel, search his rooms——"

"Mrs Leleu can help you there."

"And Gibbings: if I can only get the better of him."

"You may; that's your buisness. But mind what you're about. He's an old soldier and has seen something of the world. Better try the housekeeper first."

Earswick felt the advice was sound, and after parting with Mr Tinson sought out Mrs Leleu.

"Well, what can I do for you, Mr Quelch?" she asked.

"I want to see the house, all parts of it; the young baronet's bedroom, and more especially the Colonel's room."

"Bedroom, or sitting-room?"

"The latter, if he had it to himself. The bedroom of course he would share."

"Yes, he had a private sitting-room—study, it was called, although it was more an office or a den."

"Where is it? I'll go there first."

"Near the front hall. But you'd better wait till you're sure Gibbings is out of the way. If he was to see you fumbling about in the Colonel's room he'd be sure to suspect."

"Confound Gibbings! I must begin with

him, then. Where shall I be likely to find him, Mrs Leleu?"

"In the stables; he's always there about this time. He's the Colonel's stud-groom, you know."

"That's good news. I'm fond of horses myself. Perhaps it will be an introduction;" and so saying the detective went in search of the redoubtable Gibbings, who was found in the yard.

A dapper, light-weight, neatly built man was Gibbings, rather "horsily" dressed, in Newmarket jacket, breeches, and gaiters, a white scarf, and horse-shoe pin. He had greyish, close-cut hair, a short whisker, and clean-shaved upper lip under his rather prominent bird-like nose.

Gibbings wished it forgotten that he had shouldered a musket and served the Queen as one of the rank and file; but he could not divest himself of his soldierly air. He stood straight and erect at the entrance of the hunting stable, giving his orders to the helpers in

the short sharp tones of a man who had learned to command when obliged to obey.

"Now, my young shaver, put your back into it—more elbow-grease," he was saying as Earswick approached to a lad polishing a bit.

"Here you, Jacob!" was his next remark as he stepped into a stall and passed his hand down a horse's legs. "D'ye call this proper work? Them fetlocks are wringing wet still. You leave them like that again and I'll wheel you into line."

"How's Corporal Major?" he went on. "Let's look at that eye in the open." Dick led him out into the yard, and Gibbings followed the horse into the daylight without noticing Earswick.

In the yard Gibbings took hold of the horse's head, and having removed a bandage, narrowly examined the horse's right eye.

"More specks: another attack of inflammation, I'm afraid. Worse luck."

"A case of 'lunatic eye,' eh?—returns with every moon," suggested Earswick.

"Holloa! where did you drop from?" Gibbings asked, turning quickly. "What do you know about it? Who are you? What do you call yourself?"

"I'm Stephen Quelch, Mr Tinson's clerk."

"That don't qualify you as a vet. What do you know about horses?"

"A thing or two. I served my time with a farrier before I studied law, and liked it better. Let's look at his eye."

Earswick's examination was long and minute.

"You may save it. He's a young one. What are you doing for him? Bleeding? Are his stables clean and cool?"

"Might be better, perhaps. We're thinking of cutting away the 'haw,'—you see it protrudes."

"Don't do it—on no account; it will only blind the horse. No; sweeten his stable, or move him if you can. Plenty of mild exercise, and above all a good lotion always to the eye. Goulard water, or vinegar and water; they're both used."

"We've a lotion of our own, prepared from

the Colonel's own prescription; makes it up himself."

"He knows, does he?"

"Ought to, from the times he's been at it. And so do you, seemingly. Not that you look to know much about a horse."

"Looks don't count," said Earswick, laughing. "This is the right rig for Lincoln's Inn. They wouldn't stand a down-the-road coat and a wisp of straw in the mouth there."

"You've not been always at that game, I understand you to say?"

"Not I. I was in a sporting stable first, then I took to doctoring horses. I've seen a thing or two."

"Ain't much to choose, I daresay, between a real 'leg' and a limb of the law."

"The law could give the ring half a stone and walk away from them. I've seen some rare plants in my time."

Gibbings looked at him and winked. Mr Quelch began to interest him. Here was a man with experiences he liked to hear.

"If you've an eye for a horse, you may like to see our lot," said the Colonel's man civilly, as he led the way back to the stable.

This was a fine chance for Earswick, a long step towards that intimacy he wished to establish. Before he parted with Gibbings they had agreed to discuss a cool tankard together at the "Cow and Pail" that afternoon.

"I shall be done long before then," said Gibbings; "but I've got a job in Market Reepham that'll keep me till dinner-time. See you again."

And with that the man went away, leaving Earswick to return to the Hall and seek out Mrs Leleu.

"Now's my time," he said to her quickly. "You promised to show me all over the house. Gibbings has gone to the town, and I shall have a clear hour or more. Take me to the Colonel's study."

The room, as Earswick found, scarcely deserved its name; it had been a sort of business or justice room in Sir Percy Lezaire's time,

handy to the front door, where the late baronet saw bailiff or keeper, or, on emergency, members of the county constabulary.

Its position had recommended it to the Colonel, who kept there his gaiters and his hobnailed boots, his spud and hunting-crop, and a very comfortable pair of slippers. Other marks of his occupancy were to be seen in the gun-cases, old Indian friends with strange addresses on them; in the fishing-rods, gaff, and nets; in the pipes and boxes of cigars.

Over the mantelpiece hung a few prints: one represented officers and men in the full uniform of the Royal Rangers, his old regiment. The rest were portraits of famous racehorses, West Australian, Wild Dayrell, and Genghis Khan, an Arab he had himself owned at Masulipatam.

"I may be here some little time, Mrs Leleu. Perhaps you'd better leave me."

"Mind Gibbings don't——"

"He shan't catch me here," said Earswick, with confidence; but when Mrs Leleu had left him he was careful to lock the door.

"Now where shall I begin?" said the detective, looking round. "This is his own private room, much as when he left it, I should say. Has he left any indication, any tell-tale, any clue as to what he has been doing, eh?"

"What sort of man was the Colonel? A sportsman, clearly. A man of business? H—m, well, yes; these papers are not untidy, they are docketed and arranged all of them as they should be. Methodical, I should say, and regular."

"Books? Not over-fond of reading, I take it, although this was called his study. Studied Ruff mostly, I expect—I see he has the complete set there—and books upon horse-doctoring and dogs."

There was a bookcase in one corner of the room, which Mr Earswick was examining as he talked to himself—an old-fashioned bookcase, with glass doors above and a cupboard below.

Neither was locked, and after taking down a few of the books on the shelves, Earswick opened the cupboard and looked in.

A heap of old rubbish; piles of sporting papers long since out of date, cartridge-cases, a whip-lash, a pair of rusty spurs, and other nondescript odds and ends.

Nothing worth looking at, surely. But it was his duty to examine everything, to lose no chance, to leave no stone unturned; and he dragged out the whole contents of the cupboard into the light.

It was at the very last, on the bottom shelf, and underneath, that he extracted a book, a nearly new book, bound in green cloth, its pages not entirely cut, with all the appearance of having been scarcely read or little used.

"How came it here? By accident or design? What is it called?"

And he opened it at the title-page almost carelessly, then gave a sudden start.

"Struck oil, by Jove! There's something in this, or I'm a Dutchman. 'Taylor on Toxicology,' a new book on poisons, hidden away in the Colonel's room!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE.

The discovery Earswick had made in the Colonel's study seemed sufficiently important to warrant closer investigation.

That a work on poisons should be found at the Hall just now was a curious, nay, a suspicious circumstance. It became doubly so when the place and manner of the discovery were considered.

"How came it here?" said the detective, as he drew a chair to the window and sat down to think, still holding the volume in his hand. "Was it concealed purposely, or carelessly thrown aside?

"If the former, why not destroyed? burnt,

for instance? It would have been effectually hidden then. Or was it forgotten, overlooked, after it had served the purpose for which it had been procured?

"That brings me to why he got it, and when. Before or after the crime? If the former, he bought it to further the deed; if the latter, it was mere curiosity—perhaps he wanted to read up something about this arsenic that had done such terrible mischief.

"Will it be possible to fix the date of purchase, I wonder? Does the book itself tell anything?"

He began now to examine it more closely; a thick, squat, small octavo volume, bound in green cloth, evidently new or nearly so, many of its pages still uncut.

"No trace of where it was bought?" he went on, looking inside the cover, where booksellers usually put their address labels and marks. "They might have been removed; or was it got second-hand at some bookstall?

It looks rather too fresh for that; however, no one knows.

"Uncut in parts? What parts are cut? The index, that of course; and, as I live! the pages dealing with arsenic. Then the book must have been bought in connection with the crime. But before or after, which? The cutting of the pages might support either hypothesis.

"I wonder what Taylor says about arsenic. I ought to know; I read the book in my student days, but can't remember now. Here it is:—

"'Arsenic is the bungler's poison, likely to be used by the illiterate and uninformed. The symptoms it produces are so plain, the traces it leaves so unmistakable, that only a clumsy criminal would use it to destroy human life.'

"Did he read those words, I wonder? How would they affect him? If he saw them first when the deed was already done, it would lead him to fix the crime on some one in a lower class. The same argument applies, and with

greater force, if he read the book before the murder. It would suggest to him an easy method of shifting suspicion from himself.

"This brings me back to where I started. I must and will discover from whom the book was first purchased."

He was still sitting by the window which commanded the drive as far as the Lodge gates.

"By Jove, there's Gibbings! Back already! He must not find me here." And the detective sprang to his feet, closing the book with a bang.

The action sent a small scrap of paper flying into the air. It must have been lying between the pages.

Earswick stooped to pick it up, and slipping it into his waistcoat-pocket, hastily quitted the room.

He went up-stairs to his own quarters, meaning to put the book on poisons in some safe place, and with this idea locked it up in his portmanteau. Then he sat down, and fingering his waistcoat-pocket almost mechanically, extracted the bit of paper.

"It may have some value, considering where I found it," he said as he looked at it.

More indeed than he had supposed.

It was only a morsel of paper, but it had a peculiar significance, a meaning all its own.

Earswick knew at a glance that it had come from a chemist's shop. There was not a doubt of that. It was a bit of blue paper such as chemists use to envelop their drugs, and there was still sticking to it a portion of the label and address.

Its exact shape and appearance, with the letters still legible, are reproduced below.

"Luck indeed!" cried the detective, more and more elated, as he scrutinised this tell-tale

fragment more and more closely. "Little doubt that I shall make a good job of this now. Any one can see what this paper once contained. PO in red letters are clearly those of the warning label POISON, that every chemist is bound by law to affix to what he sells. Below, GR are the initial letters of that chemist's name; he lived in High Street somewhere, that is equally plain. A little patience will certainly bring me to that chemist's door—if I have to search the whole of the archives of the Pharmaceutical Society! but, please goodness, a county directory will suffice.

"That will keep, however, till later in the day. Let me consider first what this new discovery means."

He walked up and down his room slowly, pondering on what had occurred.

"I have no doubt now that the book was bought before the murder. It was a stepping-stone leading straight to the crime. The scent is weak, perhaps, but we are on the trail. I

must have more evidence, of course, to run the Colonel in; it will have to be proved that he administered the drug—not necessarily proved, but at least strongly presumed, and I am far from that still, although I begin to have no moral doubt who did the crime. If I can only bring home the purchase of this arsenic to him, or connect it in any way with that which caused Sir Carysfort's death!"

After more deep cogitation, Earswick prepared to leave his room.

"I suppose nothing was found in the young baronet's bedroom; I wonder whether it was searched? A little late in the day, perhaps; still I ought to look into this."

And with this idea he again went to the housekeeper.

"Well?" asked Mrs Leleu, curious as to the result of his investigations in the Colonel's study.

"Nothing much." The detective had already learned the lesson of caution, and talked as little as possible of the progress he made, even

to a possible ally and friend. "At any rate, Gibbings came back, and I thought it better to make tracks. But there is something else you promised me."

"I'll be as good as my word. What was it?"

"Can I see the young baronet's bedroom now? The one in which he died, I mean."

"Why, surely! You will just have time before dinner." And Mrs Leleu led the way to the first floor.

The bedchamber in which the last painful scene had been enacted was locked; it had been shut up entirely since the funeral.

The housekeeper opened the door, then stepped to the window to draw up the blinds.

"Is the room just as it was?" asked Earswick, looking round.

"Pretty nearly. But of course it's been thoroughly cleaned."

"Ah! I thought so. I can't have it all my own way," said the detective half to himself, with a vexed, disappointed air.

"You couldn't expect the place to be left as it was—after a death too?"

"Who cleaned the room? One of the maids?"

"Simpson, the second housemaid."

"I should like to see her, to ask her a few questions."

"Won't I do? I was with her all the time."

"Were you, Mrs Leleu? That's better. What was done?—carpet up?"

"No; only swept with tea-leaves."

"Which were thrown away?"

"Naturally, on to the dust-heap; we couldn't keep them."

"Was the bed moved?"

"Yes, and the whole of the furniture."

"Even to this waste-paper basket?" said the detective, pointing to one which stood near the fireplace, and which was by no means empty.

"Well, no. Now you ask me, I believe that basket was forgotten; how or why I cannot say."

He had not listened to more than the first

few words, but had swooped instantly down upon the waste-paper basket, the contents of which he at once emptied upon the dressing-table. Then he went through the whole of the rubbish, carefully examining every atom of refuse, every scrap of paper, one by one, till he had considerably diminished the heap.

Only at the last was his patience rewarded, and he came upon two more scraps of blue paper, identical, as he fondly hoped, with that he had discovered in Taylor's 'Toxicology.' These he transferred quickly to his waistcoat-pocket, caring little whether Mrs Leleu had noticed the action or not.

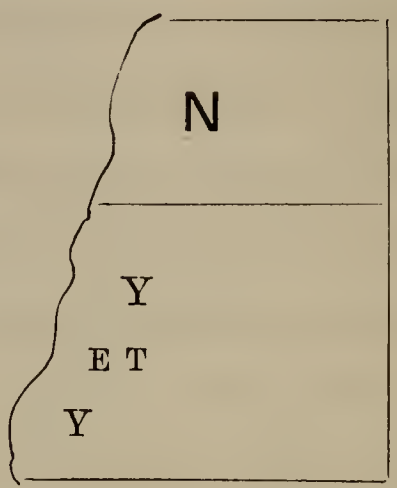
"I shall want to go to the dust-heap by-and-by," he said, laughing.

"You do your work thoroughly, and no mistake. Nasty work too, I take it. I'm glad I don't earn my living that way. But you had better have your dinner first, or the smells might do you harm."

"I will just step up-stairs to wash my hands, and then be with you, Mrs Leleu."

The detective wanted another five minutes to compare the fragments last found with the first.

Both were of the same colour, but only one bore any portion of the printed label, the end evidently, as the letters plainly showed :—



"N, in red ink, the last letter of poison. Y, the last letter of the chemist's name. How long a name, I wonder? Three red letters intervening, ISO. Not a very long name, at any rate. There are the two last letters also of street, but only the final letter of the town or place. Not much to go upon, but enough, I hope, even if the dust-heap yields no treasures."

The dinner was much the same as the previous meals. Mrs Leleu did the honours

hospitably; and the loutish Podifat slouched in as usual when the others had half done.

"We will go now to the dust-heap," said Earswick, after Podifat had left the room.

"I'll show you where it is, if you wait till I put a bonnet on; but you can't expect me to be raking and routing in such filth. I should lose all my authority in this house if I were seen there by the maids."

"No one will see us now: the dinner is going on in the servants' hall."

"Well, well; have your own way." And Mrs Leleu escorted the detective to the outer yard, where the tubs containing the pig's-wash was kept and all the household refuse was thrown.

Here she left him, and Earswick, who had armed himself with a garden-rake, stoutly attacked a heap in one corner which Mrs Leleu had indicated as that most likely to contain the sweepings of the up-stair rooms. The detective was soon encouraged by the unmistakable evidence of tea-leaves in large quantities, show-

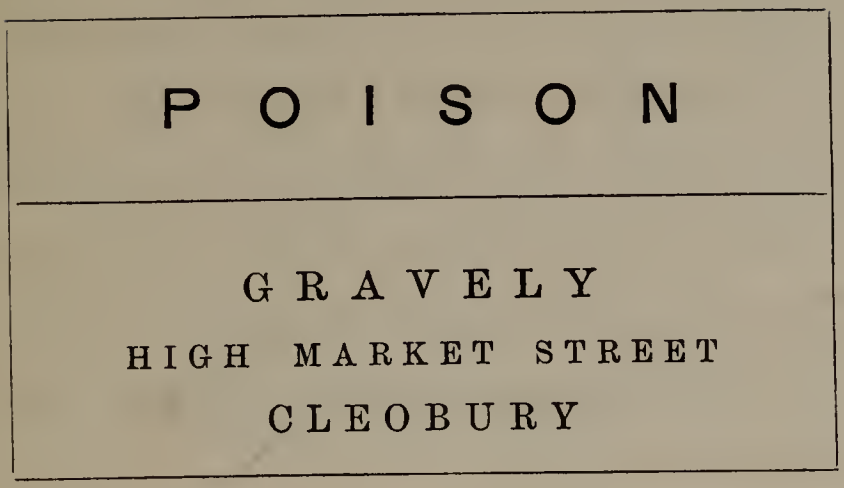
ing that the house-cleaning at Straddlethorpe was very thoroughly and completely done.

No dustman or *chiffonier* could have turned over the uninviting mass more delicately or with greater patience and care. But Earswick raked out more than half the rubbish before he came upon what he sought.

There they were, however, at last: many more scraps of the same bright blue paper, damp and mildewed by their contact with the moist leaves, but still perfectly recognisable. He picked them up, four or five, as eagerly as a gold-digger or diamond-seeker the last product of repeated washings. Holding them gingerly in the hollow of his hand he once more regained his room.

Amongst the pieces picked up on the dust-heap was that containing the centre of the torn label, and he could now supply the missing letters.

Putting the whole together, the label read as follows:—



"That's splendid! Before the day is out I will know who it was that bought the poison."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CHEMIST OF CLEOBURY.

Cleobury was a village, or something more, lying a dozen miles from Straddlethorpe, on the opposite side from Market Reepham. Earswick knew it perfectly well, although his police duties had never taken him in that direction. It was on the railway, on the branch line that ran from Market Reepham to the Wolds. This line was that which served Straddlethorpe, but the station was a mile or more from the Hall. The detective, eager to follow up the scent already so warm, was all impatience to pay a visit to the chemist's, but he remembered his engagement to drink a pot of ale with Gibbings at the village public that afternoon.

"What shall I tell him?" thought Earswick. "That I am called away on business? He might want to accompany me, and that would be awkward. At the same time, I must not throw him over—he may be of use to me. I shall want to know more about the Colonel, perhaps, and it won't do to quarrel with the man yet. I suppose I had better keep my appointment with Gibbings, and go to Cleobury later in the day."

Accordingly he strolled over to the "Cow and Pail" about three o'clock, where he found his friend.

"Thought you weren't coming," said Gibbings, after doing the honours.

"I'm on a long job, and the governor would cut up rough if it weren't done in time; he's a tight hand. Is yours?"

"What! the Colonel? Easy as a glove while you run his way."

"Have you been with him long?"

"Nigh upon nineteen years. He picked me out as his batman when I was only a raw re-

cruit, and I have stuck to him ever since. He's been a good master to me, and I like his ways."

"A sportsman, eh?"

"I believe you. He's a fine judge of a horse, and loves them as I do."

"Races? Bets?"

"We've been upon the turf, him and me, from the time we lay at Bareilly with the old corps. He had a Pegu pony there that nothing could touch, and we owned the famous Arab, Genghis Khan—you may have heard of him—that upset all the pots at Madras."

"Does he own any race-horses now?"

"Not at present," said Gibbings, implying that the Colonel might some day have a stable second to none. "Now we've come into our money, perhaps——"

"The Colonel's richer than he was, then?"

"Why, you ought to know that. Don't his missis come in for all this?"

And Gibbings waved his hand towards the fields, every acre of which belonged to Straddlethorpe.

"Yes, but there are such things as settlements. Perhaps the property's tied upon her and her chicks."

"Anyhow he'll have the control of the income, a good round sum; and he'll spend it, too, like a prince. He wanted it."

"What! The Colonel was a little short of cash, eh?"

"It ain't my business to talk over my master's affairs, but I know he dropped on the Two Thousand, and he's got a heavy book for the Leger."

"The only books he cares about, I take it."

"You're right there. The Colonel's not what you call a studious character. I never knew him read much but Ruff, or 'Youatt on the Horse.'"

"He's a bit of a horse-doctor, I think you said?"

"I'll back his recipes against any in the kingdom. He makes them up himself."

A sudden qualm seized Earswick. What if the arsenic had been bought as stable medicine?

"Secrets, eh?" asked the detective. "You couldn't tell a friend what he uses?"

"I couldn't, for I don't know. But I could let you have any to try; I generally keep some of each."

Earswick thanked Gibbings cordially, and noted the offer as one that might still serve in the inquiry.

They gossiped on for half an hour more, exchanging ideas upon stable management, racing scandals, and the straightest tips.

At last Earswick got up saying—

"I must go back to my papers. Worse luck!"

"Shirk 'em," said Gibbings. "Come along with me. I'm going to exercise the horses; you shall have a mount."

"Wish I could, but I daren't. Ta, ta!" and Earswick returned to the Hall.

His talk with Gibbings had been distinctly useful to him. Much light had been let in on the Colonel's ways, and something more than a hint of impecuniosity had been thrown out, suggesting, if not absolutely supplying, a motive for the crime.

"If I can only tumble upon something at the chemist's," said Earswick. "I'll go there now, only I must let Gibbings clear out first."

And he stood by the window, watching the grooms ride away with their string of horses. Then he put on his hat and walked over to Straddlethorpe station.

It was still daylight when he reached Cleobury. Five minutes' walk brought him to the straggling hamlet, consisting of little more than one long street, extending to either side of the central market square.

On one side of this, just opposite a decrepit equestrian statue that might have been Julius Cæsar or George I., was the chemist's shop of which he was in search.

Mr Gravely, whose name appeared in large letters over his shop-front, stood behind the counter,—a short-sighted, nervous little man, whose freckled face turned pale at the first abrupt question asked by the detective—

"Do you keep a poison-book as required by the statute?"

"Poison-book?" repeated the chemist in an agitated voice, as if anticipating trouble.

"Precisely; to register the sale of all poisons. You are wondering, perhaps, why I ask. I am a police officer; here is my card. Be careful."

"I am sure I have no wish to be otherwise. I am most willing to help the law," said Mr Gravely, bowing humbly and rubbing his hands.

"Then let me see the book—if you have one. If you haven't, you will get into trouble."

"But indeed I have. I am bound to observe the statutes. Here it is."

Earswick drew a stool to the counter, and quickly turned over the leaves of the ledger. He began with the last entry, and followed with his finger every other for many pages back.

Suddenly he stopped with a cry of satisfaction.

"Here it is; his own name too. What a double-dyed egregious fool! But I suppose he could get it on no other terms."

"Look at this, please," he went on, address-

ing the chemist. "Do you recollect the circumstances under which this entry was made?"

"That? Certainly," replied the chemist, reading the entry aloud from a form, of which the following is an exact copy :—

Date.	Drug.	Quantity.	Purpose.	Signature.	Witness.
188– 29 April	Arsenic	½ drachm	Horse medicine	F. St Evelyn	H. Gravely.

"You sold this quantity of arsenic to the person who signed for it?"

"Person? Why, of course. It was Colonel St Evelyn of Straddlethorpe Hall."

"You are certain of that? You knew him?"

"To be sure. Everybody knows Colonel St Evelyn. He has not been long in the county, but he goes about a good deal."

"And the witness knew him? But how do you explain this? H. Gravely, that is your name. You are not competent as a witness. The law required some second person to whom the buyer was known as well as to you."

"It was my son; he has the same name as myself."

"Is he here? Call him."

"My son has gone to Market Reepham; but I will send him over to you if you wish."

"I presume that, like yourself, he could identify the purchaser as Colonel St Evelyn?"

"Oh, of course," said the chemist, but rather doubtfully.

"You would lay yourself open to a very serious charge if you sold poison to a person you did not know: I suppose you are aware of that?"

"Oh, but I knew him. It was in the dusk, but I knew him—a dark, sharp-speaking, military-looking gentleman,—there was no mistaking him."

"In the dusk, eh? About what time?"

"About seven, I should say."

"How did he come? Ride or drive?"

"Neither; he walked. At least I saw no horse or cart at the door."

"No doubt he walked," said Earswick to himself. "It would attract least attention.

If he had ridden or driven, there would have been the groom or the horse to hold."

"He was alone?" was the detective's next question, addressed to the chemist.

"I am sure of that; quite alone."

"And do you remember how he was dressed?"

"Yes, I think so. The Colonel had on a rather peculiar cloak, made loose. They call them by some Scotch name—macintosh?"

"A waterproof, then?"

"I don't think so."

"Perhaps it was an ulster?"

"That's Irish."

"Well, an Inverness?"

"That's the name. I remember now. It was made of Scotch plaid, big pattern, yellowish, with red lines."

"Rather staring, in fact."

"That's what I thought it, and how I remember it so well."

"And you would know it again?"

"Yes, I could swear to it."

"And the wearer?"

"Him too. I should know his voice and his way."

"Well, Mr Gravely, I won't conceal from you that what you have told me is of the utmost importance. You may have heard what has happened at the Hall?"

"I saw it in the papers. But——" a light seemed to break in on the chemist suddenly—"you cannot mean to say that the Colonel's suspected?"

"What do you say to this?" replied Earswick sternly, putting his finger on the poison-book. "It's quite incomprehensible to me why you have not come forward before this. You knew as we all did that poor young Sir Carysfort had been poisoned by arsenic, and yet you have volunteered no information of what you had sold. You will have to explain this, I promise you."

"I had quite forgotten it, I assure you."

"That's hard to believe."

"Well, I won't say that it didn't cross my

mind; but dear, dear, was I to go and accuse the Colonel, his own brother-in-law? Besides, he said he wanted it for his horses—it's entered so there."

"You have a confiding disposition, Mr Gravely," said the detective grimly, "and I warn you, you will have to justify all this to the proper authorities. I don't suppose you want to be taken up as an accomplice."

"Gracious heavens! don't hint at such a thing." The little chemist was trembling in every limb.

"Well, it's quite on the cards, and it will all depend on how you conduct yourself."

"I'm sure I am ready to do anything, everything required."

"It is in the first place essential that you should hold your tongue; you must preserve the most absolute secrecy about this."

"I promise, sir—I promise."

"And you must give up this register to me. There must be no risk of losing it—it is far too important in the case."

"How about my regular work, sir? I shall want that ledger."

"Open another; I must have this. Let me see now," and Earswick walked once or twice round the shop. "Is there anything else to be said or done? No; I think not. I will not trespass on your time any further, Mr Gravely, except to repeat my cautions. Be circumspect and silent, or you may get into serious trouble."

With this rather threatening farewell, the detective put the poison register under his arm, and retraced his steps to Cleobury station.

CHAPTER XX.

A CLOAK, COAT, OR CAPE.

One or two doubtful points served to embitter Earswick's joy as he travelled back to Straddlethorpe that evening.

There was first the possibility that some one —the real criminal, and for his own guilty purpose — had personated Colonel St Evelyn at Cleobury.

Was this possible? was it probable? The answer was surely in the negative.

How could the chemist, Mr Gravely, a neighbour in the county, be mistaken in his man? He had declared that he knew and recognised the Colonel.

"But not too positively. I fancied I detected

an accent of doubt in his words. He was a poor creature at best—broke down almost with me. What would he do in the witness-box? Suppose he had been wrong after all?

"There is the signature, though. That may help. I must compare it with another, a certainly genuine signature; I shall be sure to find one among the papers Mr Tinson left.

"And the description — the *signalement* — that will be hard to get over. The Inverness cape or cloak was a remarkable object in its way; I ought to be able to trace that to its rightful owner.

"On the other hand, there is the ostensible purpose for which the drug was bought—horse medicine. Now I know from Gibbings that the Colonel made up his recipes. Shall I be able to ascertain what these contained? Gibbings promised to let me have some of the stuff. I must, if possible, get one of each kind, and have them analysed. They're bound to tell some story—one way or the other."

In his eagerness, Earswick almost ran to the library on his return to the Hall.

To give colour to the detective's occupation, a number of documents — law papers, leases, and so forth — had been left by Mr Tinson. These lay on the library table, where Earswick sat and worked when not otherwise employed.

"If I remember right," the detective said as he seated himself at this table, "the Colonel signed that surrender of the Doddington lease. I had it in my hands this morning. Ah! here it is."

He untied the red tape and opened out the great formal parchment, engrossed in the customary copperplate. At the end of it was the signature he sought.

To take the chemist's poison register from his pocket, open it at the suspicious entry, and compare the two signatures, was the work of a moment for the detective.

"The same!" he cried—"absolutely and iden-

tically the same! There can be little doubt now that it was the Colonel himself who bought the stuff. Some one else might have personated him, but surely no one could have counterfeited his hand.

"That disposes pretty well of my difficulty as to identity. And I shall still have as a second string the testimony of the cloak, coat, or cape. I must find that cloak, coat, or cape, or at any rate get evidence that the Colonel owned and wore one.

"How can I best manage this? Gibbings? He would know, of course; but how am I to ask him about his master's clothes? It would be most imprudent at this stage. There's Mrs Leleu; of course I don't want her to know exactly what I'm at, still I ought to be able to get out of her what I want, if I go the right way to work."

After tea he very adroitly led the conversation in the necessary direction. Mrs Leleu, now that the detective was playing with his cards on the table, was ready enough to talk

to him on any subject, but especially about the Colonel.

"Did you see much of him?" asked the detective.

"More than I cared about. He was always messing about, interfering with other people's work."

"What! in the house? I thought his tastes were mostly outdoor."

"That of course; but nothing came amiss to him, if he had a chance of ordering other people about, hectoring here, and bullying there, and poking his nose in everybody's business."

"I wonder he found time. He looked after the estate, didn't he?"

"I believe you. Ask the bailiff, or the farmers, or the labourers. He was always ranging up and down, finding fault, and pretending to teach every one his business."

"I suppose he was fond of exercise."

"He must have been, or else it was his unquiet spirit, for he never seemed to rest; out in all weathers too."

"Ah!" Earswick saw an opening at last. "I wonder he didn't take cold. You wouldn't have been sorry, I daresay."

"Him take cold? Never. He's too hard. Besides, he looked after himself too well for that."

"Wrapped up warm on cold days, eh?"

"I should think so. Why, he had coats for all weathers, all thicknesses, all sorts and shapes."

"A wise man. In a changeable climate like this, the same topcoat don't do for two days running, as I've found before now. I'd like to get a wrinkle from the Colonel."

"Get Gibbings to show you his wardrobe, then."

"I'd like to, if I thought it was safe. What I want is something loose to go over another coat — a thing you could throw off and on easily."

"I've seen the Colonel in something of the sort: what they call an Inverness, I think."

"Have you, now?" Earswick tried hard to assume indifference as he drew near the point

at which he had aimed. "What kind was it? What stuff? What colour?"

"Oh, I can't tell. Scotch, I should say; a tartan or a plaid. Rather staring pattern; drab, or rather yellow, with bright red lines."

"That would hardly do for me. I should be known by my coat, as I daresay the Colonel was."

"It's likely enough. He was fond of that coat; I have seen him in it dozens of times."

Earswick was delighted. He had come upon just what he wanted.

"Well, anyway, I'll get Gibbings to show it me, if it's only to get a pattern of the shape."

"I wouldn't do anything of the kind, if I were you. He'd only suspect something."

"Perhaps you are right. I'd best leave it and him alone," said the detective; and soon after he bade the housekeeper good night.

But he had no intention of dropping his friend Gibbings, and relying upon his own acumen and discretion, trusted still to turn him to profitable account.

They did not meet again till next morning, when Earswick found him as usual at the stables.

"You promised yesterday to let me have some of your stable specifics—the Colonel's prescriptions I mean," said the detective, after he had inquired in due form about the sick horse, and had examined the other occupants of the stalls.

"Right you are. But why do you want them?"

"I still do a little veterinary work at odd times, and I'm always willing to learn. Now if these medicines are worth anything——"

"There's nothing like them, take my word for that. I've tried them this many a year, and the Colonel, he believes in them too."

"Perhaps some day he'll give me the receipts himself."

"I doubt that; he keeps them even from me. But don't let that put you out. You can always have what you want if you write me a line."

"You shan't lose by it."

"Oh, come! Between friends, you know."

"They will be worth money to me, and you ought to have your share. Why, if I were you I'd turn a pretty penny. Get the Colonel to supply the goods and you sell them."

"I don't think I'll do that. He might not like it, and I'd be sorry to vex him. I don't mind obliging you; that's another pair of shoes."

"Well, when can I have them?"

"Why, now if you choose. There's only half-a-dozen of them. Come this way, into the harness-room."

"Here you are," went on Gibbings, taking down a bottle or two and some tin boxes.

"These are the cordial balls; I never knew their equal after a hard day's hunting. These are the cough balls, and this embrocation never fails. There's some of the eye-water, some fever powders, and some for worms. Now you are fitted out with the whole biling."

Earswick was profuse in his thanks.

"I tell you what it is, Mr Gibbings, you are a real downright trump; if there's anything I

can do for you just say the word. And look here, it's my turn to stand treat. Shall we meet again at the 'Cow and Pail'?"

"I'm your man. But it must be late; I've got enough to keep me busy till night."

So had Earswick. Returning to the house with his medicines, he regained his room, and there made the whole into a safe and convenient parcel. Then, without another word to a soul in the Hall, took the next train from Straddlethorpe into Market Reepham.

Arrived at the county town, he went to a quiet public not far from the police station, and sent a message round to the chief constable.

Captain Bracebridge came at once to hear what his subordinate had to say.

"I thought it better, sir, to report in person," said Earswick. "I have come upon some important facts, as I think you will agree."

And then the detective detailed the steps he had taken, and the success that had attended them.

"You are on the right line, I haven't a doubt

of that. And the case looks blacker than ever against the Colonel."

"Is the evidence strong enough to convict, sir?"

"It's purely circumstantial, of course, and juries are difficult to deal with; but when you take the whole of the facts together, I don't see how any sensible man could hesitate."

"There's still the question of the cloak. If I can lay my hands on that, and the chemist identifies it, we shall have tangible corroboration on the point of identity."

"I quite agree with you, Earswick. You must lay your hands on that Inverness."

"I will have it, right or wrong. Gibbings shall give it me, or I will take it."

"If the worst comes to the worst, we will get a search-warrant."

"Better try no extreme measures sir, until fair ones have failed. I am to meet Gibbings to-night; perhaps I shall get the better of him, although he has got a hard head."

"Do you call those fair means?" said the chief

constable, laughing. "Fair or foul you should say."

"Well, sir, we police must not be too particular. You tell me to get the cloak, and I must obey your orders."

"You are a promising, painstaking young officer, Earswick, and I am satisfied with you. Have you anything else to say?"

"Only about these medicines. I've brought them over with me; they ought to be analysed."

"Quite right. It shall be done. We'll send them up to town. Although the evidence they supply will not serve us, unless in the negative way."

"I do not quite follow you, sir."

"Why, you see, they will either be found to contain arsenic, or they won't. If they do, then there is the explanation of the purchase and use of the poison."

"Of course; I understand. While if they don't——"

"The arsenic was bought for some other purpose."

"Excellently reasoned, sir."

"But the evidence, if it is that way, is only negative at best."

"Yes, sir; but, as you have said, when taken in connection with all the other facts——"

"It will weigh with the jury, there's no doubt of that. So don't be cast down, but go on as you have begun, Earswick; you may hit on still more."

And with this the chief and his lieutenant separated, Earswick returning without delay to the Hall.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CASE IS CLEAR.

THE bar parlour of the "Cow and Pail" was a snug little place, to which Mr Gibbings, as one of the upper servants at the Hall, was always welcome. His friend Mr Quelch was equally welcome, more especially as he gave a liberal order for drink.

"What's your weakness, Mr Gibbings?" asked the detective. "Beer sits cold on the stomach this time of night. Shall we say whisky hot, or rum?"

"There's nothing like old Jamaica if you get it sound. 'Tain't bad here, although it might be older. They spoiled us for rum in the Crimea."

"You were there, were you?"

"At the end of the siege, yes—before we went to the 'Shiny.'"

"'Shiny'?"

"Yes, the 'Shiny East': that's our soldier's name for India."

"Was the Colonel in the Crimea too?"

"He was that. I went to him there as batman. He picked me out, as I think I told you, chiefly, I believe, because we were much of a size."

"You and the Colonel? What would that matter?"

"A good deal to both of us. You see I could wear his old things; that saved his pocket, and I got the clothes."

"Economical that. And does the arrangement still continue?"

A new feature was suddenly introduced into the inquiry. For the first time it occurred to Earswick that Gibbings might have personated the Colonel. What if the master had sent his man to Cleobury? The detective made a note of this new suspicion, the effect of which was

to include Gibbings as an accessory, and to call for special observation of the servant.

"Well, yes, in a way: although nowadays I get a couple of new suits a-year, I still have the pick of what the Colonel casts off,—not that I want them much now."

"A nice little perquisite all the same. Anything from a good tailor is worth money. I suppose you know that."

Gibbings winked.

"Next time you come in for a haul you might let me know," said the detective. "I'm obliged to dress smart for Lincoln's Inn, and I can't afford to go to the West End."

"Perhaps we can deal. Is there anything particular you want?"

"Well, I'd be glad of a good topcoat against winter, if you could help me to such a thing."

"What kind? Black cloth?"

"No; something loose that I could throw over another coat and take off when I get to the office. It's precious cold, I tell you, on November mornings. You try walking from Camden

Town to Lincoln's Inn about daylight in winter time."

"Well, I'll remember you next time the Colonel overhauls his kit."

"There's nothing you can think of just now? I have to look ahead, you know."

Earswick waited anxiously for the answer to a question that was more important than it seemed.

"Well, there's an old Inverness the Colonel's very fond of; he's had a good deal of wear out of it, and it ought to be coming my way soon."

"Warm, is it, and decent-looking?"

"It's a first-class article. A little loud, perhaps, but warranted to keep out the cold."

"Can I see it?"

"I daresay, if I can lay my hands on it. That reminds me, I haven't seen it myself very lately."

"Perhaps the Colonel's got it with him."

"Not he. I know what he took, for I packed his things. No, it's somewhere in his dressing-room."

"Well, if you think of it—only don't put yourself out of the way," said Earswick, secretly well satisfied with what he heard.

But he made up his mind to know more about that cloak; he would find out for himself, that very night if possible. Why should he not pay a visit to the Colonel's dressing-room? Mrs Leleu might help him here. The only point was to elude Gibbings, and this would probably be easy. Gibbings himself seemed likely to make it so.

As the evening wore on it was evident that the veteran could not resist the fascinations of his favourite spirit. He might have been weaned on ration rum, as he himself confessed to his entertainer after the fifth tumbler hot; and although as seasoned as such a veteran soldier should be, it was clear as bedtime approached that he had had his allowance and something more.

"I'm fit for picket," he hiccupped as he stood with difficulty on his feet, "but not for guard. Hope they won't nab me at the gate as I pass in."

His mind unhinged was wandering back to barrack-days.

"It's not my first chalk. They'd stop my passes and give me pack-drill. I think I'll stay absent."

"No, no," said Earswick, taking him by the arm. "I'll see you safe home to the Hall."

"Hall?" repeated Gibbings, still bewildered. "The Hall? Why, of course; I forgot. They can't make me a defaulter. 'I care for nobody,'" he sang it with maudlin jollity, "'no, not I; and nobody cares for me.'"

"Well, come along; it's getting late," and Earswick helped his companion into the fresh air, the effect of which was to increase rather than diminish his intoxication.

However, with a little trouble, Gibbings was got to the Hall, where Earswick, the butler assisting, put him to bed.

It was still comparatively early, and the detective found Mrs Leleu still up in the housekeeper's room.

"I want to go to the Colonel's room—his dressing-room I mean."

"What, at this time of night! It would look odd. Suppose Gibbings——"

"Gibbings is in bed; I have just put him there."

"Sober?"

"Well, we won't say too much about that. Anyway, he won't interfere."

"What are you going to do?"

"Overhaul the Colonel's wardrobe. I want to see that coat, the one you were talking about yesterday."

"Hasn't he got it with him abroad?"

"Gibbings said not. But come along, and bring your keys; the wardrobes may be locked."

"I have duplicates if they are," said the housekeeper, as she provided herself with a key-basket and led the way up-stairs.

The dressing-room, which communicated with one of the best bedrooms in the house—that, in fact, to which the St Evelyns moved on their second day at the Hall—looked a little deserted,

as was natural in its occupier's absence. All the dressing appliances had been put away, neat curtains concealed the boot-rack, there were no clothes about, no dressing-gown, no greatcoats hanging behind the doors. Gibbings, who personally valeted the Colonel, was of an orderly methodical nature, and he took a pride in the tidiness of his master's room.

Earswick looked round, noting the various receptacles for clothes. There was a "hanging" cupboard, a double-winged wardrobe, and two chests of drawers. He tried the doors of the wardrobe and all the drawers; nothing was locked except the cupboard, but the key was in the door.

"Can I help?" asked Mrs Leleu, as she lighted the candles on the dressing-room table.

"Much obliged, but I think not. I like to make my searches myself; I am certain then that nothing's been missed,"—and the police officer proceeded to carry out his investigation in a regular matter-of-fact fashion.

He inspected every drawer in turn, exam-

ining the contents with deft nimble fingers like a custom-house searcher. He opened the cupboard and brought a candle to bear on everything that hung therein. He did the same with the wardrobe, and made sure by feeling with his hands that nothing escaped him.

Less than half an hour sufficed to satisfy him of the fruitlessness of his search. There was no Inverness cape of the kind he wanted amongst the Colonel's effects.

"It isn't here," he said to Mrs Leleu. "Is there nowhere else I can look?"

"Well, there's madam's room—the bedroom, you know. But I don't see how it could get in there."

"I had better look," said the detective. "We mustn't do things by halves."

This second investigation was no more successful than the first.

"I can't think what's come of it," said Mrs Leleu. "There's the gun-room, the study, and the hat-stand in the hall; it might be left

hanging there, only I think I should have noticed it."

"We will go down-stairs and see for ourselves," said Earswick, hoping in his heart that the cloak might not turn up at all.

Nor did it. There was no trace of it anywhere in the house, and Earswick, remembering Gibbings's assurance that the Colonel had not taken it away with him, was brought naturally to a positive conclusion that it had disappeared.

"I'm glad of it," he said to himself as he went up-stairs to his room. "It's just as it ought to be. Of course he has made away with the cloak; to have left it amongst his things would have been to assist identification.

"The case is pretty well complete, I think, now. I doubt whether I can do much more here, but I had better stay till I get my orders from the chief."

With that he turned in, to sleep the sound satisfied sleep of the man who has done his duty and met with his reward.

He was as usual early next morning; the habit had grown upon him since he had joined the force, and he was always up betimes, even when he had no special object to gain.

It was so this morning, and after dressing leisurely he strolled down-stairs, hardly knowing what to do with himself till breakfast-time.

A walk in the park promised to be pleasant, but on his way to the hall door he passed the Colonel's study.

"I might have another look through his room. I was too much excited last time to explore it completely. Who knows but what I might come upon some more evidence! Gibbings is not likely to interrupt me; he cannot have slept off his debauch quite yet. What a head he'll have!"

Earswick entered the room, and after looking round to refresh his memory with its contents, proceeded to examine the contents of the drawers, to overhaul the cupboards of the bookcase, and handle afresh all the books and papers about.

He was so busily engaged with his task that the door opened and some one entered before he was aware of it. It was Gibbings, whose voice, rather brusque and menacing, caused him to turn.

"Holloa! my fine fellow, what are you doing here?"

"Why, Mr Gibbings, is that you?" The detective was slightly disconcerted, and found it difficult to improvise a plausible excuse.

"Did Mr Tinson tell you to take stock of the Colonel's papers?" asked Gibbings, sarcastically.

"Not exactly," stammered Earswick. "I was only looking for something I had missed."

"In here?" asked Gibbings, sharply. "Then you have been in here before? I thought as much. You came here to spy and pry, you mean hound."

"Fair and softly, Mr Gibbings; no hard names."

Earswick was more and more disconcerted. It took him quite aback to find the old soldier

thoroughly alert and sensible in spite of his previous night's potations.

"Who are you? I was an ass to trust you without knowing more about you. Do you belong to the police?"

"I have told you who I am."

"Tinson's clerk? That don't gammon me; I know better. You stole a march on me last night, I couldn't for the life of me tell why, but I know now I find you here; it was you who turned over my master's things last night."

"I, Mr Gibbings!" protested Earswick. "What can you mean?"

"I mean that some strange hand has been meddling and muddling in the Colonel's cupboards and drawers. Things are not as I left them, I could swear to that."

"Have you been to the Colonel's room, then, this morning?"

"I have—where you were last night. Don't deny it; I shan't believe you."

"Upon my word, Mr Gibbings, you are behaving very strangely. I am here on business."

"Dirty detective business. You'd better clear out. Go back to where you came from before I make you."

Gibbings looked threatening.

"I can take care of myself," replied Earswick, stoutly. "If I couldn't, I could appeal to Lady Lezaire."

"Of course she'd take your part. I know now who set you on. She hates my master, and would do all she could to ruin him."

"In what way?" asked Earswick, innocently.

"Yah! you know. You can't humbug me. You go your way and let me go mine. And see here, your way don't lie this way, so clear out of this double quick, and don't let me catch you in this room again."

Gibbings showed Earswick the door, and following him out, locked it.

"Any one that wants to go in there will have to come to me for the key. Don't you try, neither here nor up-stairs."

Had this stormy *rencontre* occurred even the day before, Earswick would have been greatly

disappointed and put out; but, fortunately for his inquiry, he had found out all he wanted before Gibbings cut up rough.

Fortified with this consoling reflection, he again went over to Market Reepham and told the chief constable what had occurred.

"No need to worry more," said Captain Bracebridge. "We have got him in a cleft stick now. I shall apply for a warrant. The case is clear."

CHAPTER XXII.

AT DIEPPE.

The season begins early at French watering-places; by the end of June it is in full swing, and in the dog-days it is at its height. In the early autumn, when our home resorts are most crowded, the season is already declining in France.

People who love their comfort prefer the early quiet time before the rush—before famine prices set in, and when accommodation is still obtainable in hotels, and private houses at comparatively reasonable rates.

No one knew this better than Colonel St Evelyn, who in his bachelor days had tried all the watering-places on the Normandy coast

in turn. It was at Trouville, as we have seen, that he won his bride and established himself in the good graces of the Lezaires. Trouville, always a favourite place, had been doubly dear to him since then, and he would have gladly returned there now until the time was ripe for his return to the Hall.

But tender-hearted Mrs St Evelyn could not bear to face the place again. To her its associations were far too painful; her loss was too recent; she could not forget the great gap made in the little family circle since last they were there.

Trouville was impossible, the Colonel readily admitted that. Rachel's will was law to him, as he told her—doubly so in such a matter as this. The sorrow with which she mourned her poor young brother was so deep-seated and sincere, that she deserved to be spared any additional pang.

So they went to Dieppe instead of Trouville, and the Colonel said he liked it better. They were comfortably housed in the Hotel Beau Ri-

vage, facing the green lawn that stretched down to the beach, and in full view of the Channel.

There had been but little reference between husband and wife to the late terrible catastrophe at the Hall. Probable causes had, of course, been discussed; but Rachel, obedient and easily impressed, had quickly accepted the Colonel's interpretation. He had insisted, with a vehemence which was quite as good as logic to her, that Sir Carysfort's death could not possibly be attributed to anything but his own imprudence; it was nonsense, wicked nonsense, to talk of poison. The verdict of the coroner's jury was preposterous and absurd. A sweet simple-minded woman, slow to think evil of any one in the world, Mrs St Evelyn was ready enough to accept this explanation. Any other, any that traced the death to some guilty cause, would have been inexpressibly repugnant to her, and would have increased her anguish a thousand-fold.

It was a very peaceful, uneventful, almost monotonous life they led, conforming, out-

wardly at least, to the ways of the place; taking their meals at the *table d'hôte* hour, lounging lazily upon the shingle under their high-thatched chairs, or listening to the music of the band. A happy family party, a delightful *ménage*, as it seemed to the French visitors: the father's distinguished military air, the graceful childlike mother, the pretty babies, with their sturdy English *bonne*.

Colonel St Evelyn seldom left his wife's side, except to take the long walks essential to a man of his active habits. He was with her now, smoking the inevitable cheroot, and skimming the day's 'Figaro,' which had just come down from Paris, when his eye fell upon two persons approaching.

"New arrivals," he observed carelessly. "Compatriots, seemingly. The place is filling fast, Rachel."

"Where are they? I don't see them."

"Why, it's——" He checked himself suddenly, adding under his breath as he rose from his seat, "What on earth brings him here?"

"Who is it? Any one you know?" went on Rachel.

"Oh no, dear, nothing of the sort. I am only going to take a turn. I shall find you here, I suppose?"

"Yes, I think so, unless you are very long. But we shall go straight back to the hotel."

Colonel St Evelyn walked towards the persons he had noticed.

"Surely I am not mistaken," he said, with outstretched hands. "It is Captain Bracebridge."

The chief constable's response was cold and repellent.

"Yes, Colonel St Evelyn, I am Captain Bracebridge. I have come to Dieppe to take——"

"To take a holiday, I presume. Well, you deserve it, more than most men."

"Mine is no holiday trip. I'd rather have come on any other."

"Indeed? What——"

"Colonel St Evelyn," went on the chief con-

stable, sternly, "it is my painful duty to inform you that I hold a warrant for your arrest."

"Good God! On what charge? You must be mad. Have a care how you exceed your powers."

"I am perfectly in form. The warrant is regular, and I am accompanied by this gentleman"—he pointed to a third person, who stood behind with Earswick—"by the police commissary of Dieppe."

"I protest. There is some terrible mistake. On what charge do you presume to interfere with me?"

"Before I tell you, it is my duty to warn you that anything you may say——"

"Yes, yes, I know the formula. Let us take it as said. What is the charge? Quick! Let me know the worst."

"You are accused of the murder of your brother-in-law, Sir Carysfort Lezaire."

"That woman! Has she dared to let her enmity, her hatred, reach such lengths as this?" cried Colonel St Evelyn, his dark cheek mantling with mingled shame and rage.

"I must again remind you, Colonel St Evelyn, to be careful what you say. Remember you are in custody."

"What are you going to do with me? My wife is here; she must not know, at least not for the present."

"Will you surrender? will you promise to go with us quietly?"

"Yes; but where? To England?"

"To England; the steamer starts in less than an hour."

"What if I refuse? We are not in England now, remember."

"No, but the law of extradition runs here. Unless you accept my terms unhesitatingly and at once, I must hand you over to this gentleman"—pointing to the French official—"who will lodge you in the local jail. You will have to wait there until we can appear before a *juge d'instruction*, who on my application will hand you over to us. I shall then handcuff you, and carry you back a close prisoner."

"The alternative is too terrible, Captain

Bracebridge; you are too strong, I submit. My poor Rachel! what will become of her? She must be told; at least some excuse must be made for my sudden departure. Captain Bracebridge, help me! You are a married man, you have children, help me. I am thinking now not of myself, but of her."

"I cannot let you out of my sight. The charge is too grave, the risks too great."

"You need not. Mrs St Evelyn is there, not a dozen yards off. Let me go to her. I will say I am summoned suddenly to England."

Captain Bracebridge hesitated, then shook his head.

"Do not refuse me this, I implore you, Captain Bracebridge. You are, like myself, an old soldier; we have both borne the Queen's commission. Let me entreat you——"

"You will make no attempt to escape?" asked the chief constable, beginning to relent.

"I give you my word of honour, as an officer and a gentleman."

Captain Bracebridge looked at him, as though

surprised that a man over whom such a terrible charge impended should presume to use these words.

"Well, I will trust you, Colonel St Evelyn, although I may be exceeding my duty. If you play me false—excuse my saying it—I shall have to appeal to force. The local authorities," he again pointed to the commissary, "will support me."

"There is nothing to fear," said the Colonel, as he walked away to where his wife still sat, unconscious of the grave trouble that had befallen her husband.

"My dear," he began, "you must prepare for a surprise."

"Ferdinand, what has happened? There is something wrong. I see it in your face. Mamma?"

"No, no; Lady Lezaire is quite well. But we are wanted back. There are some important matters, with regard to the succession—and others—that must be attended to at once. We must go back to England."

"I am quite ready, dear. Only, of course, it will take us some days to prepare."

"Yes; and that's why I thought, perhaps, I had better go on ahead — you would not mind?" he asked, anxiously.

"Oh no. I shan't like it, of course, without you. But I can do everything, and there are the servants. But is there such hurry? When would you start?"

"To-day, I think. The mail goes this afternoon. I am anxious there should be no unnecessary delay. The lawyers are very urgent."

"Is it Mr Tinson? Surely he might have written."

"Mr Tinson, yes; and your mother, I fear. Lady Lezaire is making difficulties. In your interests, and those of our dear children——"

"Oh, Ferdinand, how good you are! Always thinking of us," said the sweet little wife, with tears of gratitude filling her soft eyes.

"I am ashamed to leave you in the lurch like this—to give you so much trouble, dearest——"

"Never mind me, Ferdinand. I can do everything, I daresay," said Mrs St Evelyn. "But you are not going yet?" she went on with a tender desire to procrastinate, seeing her husband turn away.

"As far as the hotel. I must put a few things together; a dressing-bag will do."

"Let me go and help you, Ferdinand. I will see to it all."

Colonel St Evelyn would not suffer his wife to worry herself, he said. It was no trouble: an old soldier ought to be able to do his own packing.

"And I'll be back directly—to say good-bye," he added cheerily as he walked off, still closely escorted by his friends.

They were more than usually affectionate—his adieux. Mrs St Evelyn, easily moved and emotional, wondered at, while she was grateful for, his fond looks, and tender, lingering farewell. She was to join him again within a few short days—why this impressive leave-taking?

There were tears in her eyes and a weight

at her heart when he was gone; the gloom and sadness of approaching evil filled her with vague forebodings and nameless fears.

As for St Evelyn, he carried his head high, walking erect and unabashed between his captors, the two officers of the law, whom the uninitiated might easily have taken for two particularly attentive familiar friends.

Who shall say what grievous thoughts occupied and oppressed him as he made the dreary journey from Dieppe to Market Reepham, from the careless freedom of the gay French watering-place to captivity within the dark and narrow limits of the county jail?

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TRIAL SIDE.

The news of Colonel St Evelyn's arrest spread like wildfire through the county. It was the talk of every tongue; common gossip everywhere. But no one exactly knew how or why he had been taken.

Only a paragraph in the local prints gave a brief account of the capture; a mysterious allusion was made to the important clues that had come into the hands of the police, and much vague praise was accorded to Mr Earswick, of whom the county was told to be proud, as a new and shining light among detectives.

But there was the undoubted fact: the Colonel was in jail. Lord Prudhames had not

hesitated to commit his fellow-justice of the peace. There must be sufficient evidence, of course; the case must be perfectly clear, or bail would not have been refused.

"Dear heart alive! it's not possible; it can't be true," said Major Ruddock, the worthy veteran who owed his position as governor of the jail to this very person whom the chief constable brought there, a prisoner, in the dead of night.

"Read your warrant, Major Ruddock. Lord Prudhames granted it. I give the Colonel's body into your safe-keeping. Remember, you will be responsible for him."

"I need no one to teach me my duty, Captain Bracebridge," replied the jail official, tartly. Major Ruddock was a hard-featured, middle-aged man, with iron-grey moustaches cut short and standing out like stiff quills, a brusque manner, and a grating voice. He had risen from the ranks of the Royal Rangers, and showed it every inch.

"It's all a mistake, of course, Ruddock,"

the Colonel said pleasantly, as they stood inside the prison lodge, while the governor signed the receipt for the person of his friend and patron.

The chief constable held up a finger menacingly. "Be careful what you say, Colonel St Evelyn."

"There, take your receipt," said the governor, interposing abruptly. "I daresay, sir"—this to the Colonel—"you'll be glad to get to bed."

"We've been travelling since three, when we left Dieppe, and now it must be——"

"Past eleven," said the governor. "Good night; there's no need to detain you police. I've seen enough of you. I wasn't bound to open to you at all after hours."

"I'm glad you did, Ruddock, or I should have gone to the police lock-up," laughed the prisoner. "A poor place. I'd much rather be your guest."

"Oh, Colonel, I'd give you the best my house contains, but——" he hesitated—"the rules; I must adhere to the rules."

"I would not ask you to break them, you may be sure," said St Evelyn. "Where are you going to lodge me?"

"On the trial side. In one of the large cells——"

St Evelyn shuddered, but recovering quickly, cried—

"I know. I've often had worse quarters in barracks when I was a jolly sub. What's the delay? Let's get on there; I want to turn in."

Certain formalities had to be observed. The prisoner was obliged to give up his watch, his rings, his money, his penknife even; the rules were read to him, and his description taken: his name, age, quality, and distinctive marks.

"The doctor ought to see you, I suppose, sir; but it's late, and he'll have gone to bed."

"Nonsense, Ruddock! I'm in excellent health. Only give me a mouthful of food and let me turn in."

The governor led the way through the dark and narrow entrance of the jail; a medieval

construction, with ponderous gates that closed with a clang, and were secured by vast bolts and massive chains. The interior, dimly lighted, was still as death, only broken by the voice of the night-watchman in slippers, challenging them in low sepulchral tones. Then they reached the "location" of newly arrived prisoners, his lodging for the night—spacious enough as a cell, but as a bedroom, compared with those of the Hall or hotel, mean and meagre at best. A stone floor, an iron bedstead fastened into the whitewashed wall, a shelf-like table under the gas light, a three-legged stool, a few tin utensils, and that was all.

"Rough, but at any rate clean. I've been worse off in old campaigning days—eh, Ruddock? And so have you."

"Dear heart! Colonel, the pity of it. What can I say? What can I do?"

"Get me some bread and cheese, or cold meat, and a glass of beer—I am allowed one pint, you know, by the regulations."

"You shall have the best that's in my larder,

Colonel. I'll fetch it myself," and the stanch old soldier hurried away, to return presently with the materials of a substantial repast.

He waited while the Colonel, with excellent appetite, ate his supper. Then he called in the night-watchman to clear away and make the prisoner's bed.

"Is there anything more I can do now—any orders for the morning, sir?"

"I should like Gibbings sent for. You know my man—he was in the Rangers with us."

"Gibbings of letter F Company? Of course I know him. I will send a messenger at unlocking by the early train. And breakfast? The rules say 6.30."

"After to-morrow I'll abide by the rules. But don't wake me in the morning, please, till I ring." The Colonel pointed with a smile to the bell-handle with which the cell was duly provided, according to Act of Parliament.

Colonel St Evelyn, in spite of the awful charge which hung over him, slept soundly that night; slept late, moreover, through the din of

the awakening jail; through the cell visitation, the unlocking of doors, the morning muster, the serving of food; he was dimly conscious of a sound of scrubbing and washing, and, as he lay in his narrow bunk between sleeping and waking, fancied himself once more in the cabin of a troop-ship, whilst they holystoned the deck overhead.

The bright sunlight streaming through the small barred window presently aroused him to the reality of his position. He sprang from the bed and turned the bell-handle.

In reply, the governor and Gibbings appeared together.

"How did you sleep, sir?" asked the governor. "It's long past nine."

"Like a top. I should be glad of some food soon, Ruddock."

"I'll see to it, sir, while Gibbings helps you to dress," and Major Ruddock withdrew.

"Well, Gibbings," continued the Colonel; "you didn't expect to see me here?"

"I was afraid they meant mischief, sir;

but I never thought it would go so far as this."

"Why, what do you mean, man? Did anything lead you to suppose I was suspected? If so, you should have let me know."

"I only found out their dirty tricks a day or two back. There's been a fellow spying and prying at the Hall these weeks past."

"Ah, a detective, I suppose: set on by Lady Lezaire."

"I can't be sure, sir, but I'm afraid that's it. My lady has got a kink in her brain, and lays the blame for everything on you."

"She abhors, detests me, I know; but I think she has gone a little too far this time. Only I must be ready to meet her. What's the line of attack; have you any idea? On what will they base the charge? What was the detective doing all the time he was at the Hall?"

Gibbings recounted Earswick's movements and manœuvres as far as he was able, upbraiding himself at the same time and without hesitation for his simplicity and want of reserve.

"I don't blame you, Gibbings," said the Colonel. "How were you to guess what he was after? At any rate, it don't matter now. What we have to think of is my defence."

"You will have a lawyer, sir, of course."

"The best that can be got for money. You shall telegraph for me to Amos Davis of High Holborn, begging him to come down for the first examination."

"When will that be, sir?"

"To-day. They are bound to have me up at once. I shall apply for a remand, and Davis can be here to-morrow. We'll turn the tables on them yet, never fear."

"It must have been a great shock to you, sir," said Gibbings, sympathetically. "And the mistress—Mrs St Evelyn, I mean—how did she take it?"

"She does not know yet. I could not break it to her over there, and now it seems more difficult than ever. How is it to be done?"

"I hope I don't intrude, sir—but wouldn't my lady——" suggested Gibbings, timidly.

"Her mother would be the proper person, of course. But how can I trust Lady Lezaire? She would probably delight in torturing my poor dear Rachel just because she is my wife."

"Oh, sir, hardly," Gibbings protested.

"I'd far rather you told her. I have every confidence in your fidelity, your good feeling, Gibbings."

"I'll do my best, sir," said the trusty servitor, with rather a husky voice. "I'm only a rough chap, sir; but you've been a good master to me, and I'd go any lengths to serve you. When shall I speak to the mistress, sir?"

"Directly she returns."

"When do you expect her, sir?"

"In the course of to-day or to-morrow. She promised to wire directly she started. You must be on the look-out for any telegrams; they will be addressed, of course, to the Hall."

"Yes, sir. Will the mistress go straight there, sir?" asked Gibbings.

"Naturally. Where else?"

"Then my lady will be bound to tell her first. Hadn't I better meet the mistress at the station, sir? I could invent some story, perhaps: say you've been taken ill and couldn't get on to the Hall; that you had to go to an hospital; and then we could bring her here. She would not know the difference at first, and you could tell her the truth, or part of it."

"I believe you're right, Gibbings; but I'm quite unable to advise. I don't mind about myself, but I'm quite knocked over when I think of her."

The governor now looked in to hint that time was running on.

"You are to be brought before the Bench at eleven, Colonel. It is only formal, but we must not be late."

"I shall apply for a remand, as I am still undefended. They must grant that. Who will be sitting?"

"A very full meeting, I expect. Lord Prudhames said he would certainly be present, and Mr Etherly and General Wyndham-Parker——"

"Who'd like to see me hanged. But I shall cheat him of that satisfaction, I think. At any rate, they shall not say I showed the white feather."

The Sessions Court was of course crowded; all Thorpeshire was convulsed. Such a *cause célèbre* had not been known in the county for a century or more.

"How does he look?" "How does he take it?" "Did he do it?" "What will he say?" These were the eager queries bandied from lip to lip as high and low, peer and peasant, magnate and working man, jostled and fought for a chance of seeing and hearing what passed.

No answer to these vexed questions, no solution of the awful problem, were afforded by St Evelyn's demeanour in court. He faced his judges — the whole bench of magistrates, of whose body he was still a member—boldly, with head erect, defiant, and unabashed. "It will save your lordship's and the court's time," he said, in reply to the first formal interrogatories, "if I ask at once for a remand. I am

still undefended. I claim time to secure legal assistance."

He spoke firmly, in a loud, high-pitched voice, as though he was giving the word of command.

"We cannot object to that," said Lord Prudhames, the chairman. "What time do you ask?"

"A day or two, my lord."

"Remand till Saturday. Enter that on the sheet, Mr Lashleigh. And you will understand"—this to the prisoner—"that we are forbidden by law to allow bail."

St Evelyn bowed in courteous acknowledgment.

"I am aware of that. I have not asked for bail."

With that he was removed, and passed by a private door direct from the court-house back to the jail.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS ST EVELYN HEARS.

The distinguished prisoner was exercising, alone, in the trial prisoners' yard that afternoon, when Gibbings, who had gone back to Straddlethorpe, entered the enclosure carrying a telegram in his hand.

"This has been opened," said the Colonel at once.

"By my lady, sir. She insisted, saying she was sure it was from Mrs St Evelyn."

"I wonder she dared. What right had she to break the seal?" he cried, as he strode impatiently up and down the narrow yard. "And now I am powerless to protect poor Rachel from her."

"Is the mistress coming to-day?" Gibbings at last ventured to ask.

"Early this evening. 'All well: starting by mid-day boat: expect us at nine,' she says."

"That explains, sir. My lady ordered the carriage—the large landau, sir, and the luggage-cart—to be at Market Reepham at nine."

"Is Lady Lezaire going to the station herself?"

"I'm not sure as to that, sir. I could find out, perhaps, if there was time."

"In any case you must forestall her. Be on the platform, Gibbings, and get first speech of Mrs St Evelyn. Tell her what we arranged together."

When the London express ran into Market Reepham station that evening, Lady Lezaire was prominent among the waiting crowd. It was her first appearance in public. She was in deep mourning for her son, and a murmur of sympathy went through the throng as she stepped forward towards the halted train.

Then Mrs St Evelyn's pretty head appeared

at the window, and it was known why the mother had come there.

Many people pressed forward, curious to hear what greetings passed between the two ladies, and in the crowd Gibbings was shut out entirely.

"Dear mother!" cried Mrs St Evelyn, directly. "But where is Ferdinand?" Her voice changed at once to one of manifest anxiety.

"He could not get here in time. He was detained," faltered Lady Lezaire, deterred by a look in her daughter's face from speaking more plainly.

"He is ill, I am sure of it. Something terrible has happened. Let me go to him at once," cried Mrs St Evelyn.

"No, no; your husband is well enough," said Lady Lezaire; "only he was prevented from coming."

"But why? You are not telling me the whole truth. I must go to him. Is the carriage here?"

"Of course, dèar," said Lady Lezaire; "the landau—there is room for you all. Come, they will see to the baggage. We will go on at once to the Hall."

The Lezaire party—her ladyship and daughter, the nurses and the two children—left the platform, making their way with some difficulty through the crowd.

Mrs St Evelyn, as she passed, caught sight of Gibbings; something in the man's face—his gravity, the fixed way in which he looked at her—prompted her to speak.

"Why, here is Gibbings. Where is your master?" she asked eagerly, and it was clear she had been quite dissatisfied with Lady Lezaire's explanation.

"The Colonel's not very well," Gibbings said, a little hesitatingly, as though the fiction prepared did not come very glibly to his tongue.

"I thought so," cried Mrs St Evelyn, snatching at the words. "I knew you were concealing something, mother. What is it? Quick! I must know the worst."

"He would like to see you as soon as possible," went on Gibbings.

"Of course. She is going to him now," put in Lady Lezaire. "We are only losing time. The carriage is waiting to take us to the Hall."

"To the Hall?" and again Gibbings's voice and manner conveyed a hidden mystery to the anxious wife.

"To the Hall," repeated Mrs St Evelyn. "Surely he is there if he is ill?" She now looked to her mother with bewildered inquiring eyes.

Before Lady Lezaire could bring herself to frame the falsehood she would have liked to utter, Gibbings had replied—

"The master is in Market Reepham; in—in—in the hospital."

"Why wasn't I told this at once? Oh, mother, you have been deceiving me. It was unfair, unkind. Take me to your master at once, Gibbings."

"I acted for the best, I assure you, Rachel," pleaded Lady Lezaire. "It was so terrible to

have to tell you. Won't you wait? Let me go with you."

"No, no; I shall go quicker with Gibbings. Get a fly."

"At least take the carriage," urged Lady Lezaire. "We can wait."

But already Mrs St Evelyn had disappeared, and was to be seen entering a cab, which Gibbings had wisely ordered to be in attendance outside the station.

It was a short ten minutes' drive from the station to the jail in Market Reepham. The summer twilight had faded out of the sky, but there was sufficient light by which to recognise the forbidding exterior of the grim old jail.

"What is this?" cried Mrs St Evelyn, as the carriage stopped. "Not a hospital! It is the prison—the county jail. Why do you bring me here?" she continued, with quickly risen agitation to Gibbings, who had dismounted the box and opened the door of the fly.

"This is where Colonel St Evelyn is," replied the man, sorrowfully.

"In jail? A prisoner? My dear husband? Impossible!"

Gibbings did not dare reply, nor did Major Ruddock, who now appeared at the lodge gate, to whom Mrs St Evelyn repeated her horror-stricken inquiry.

"At least he will tell me himself. Take me to Colonel St Evelyn this instant!" she cried, half frantic with indignation and terror.

"The visiting hours are past," humbly protested the governor, "but——"

"I must and will see him. The rules cannot apply to him. You shall not keep me from him."

The stern disciplinarian gave way, but with manifest reluctance, to the pathetic entreaties of his old friend's wife.

Poor Mrs St Evelyn was led through the same dreary passages that her husband had traversed the night before, realising with a deeper anguish the horrors of this gruesome place. She was almost fainting when the last bolts were withdrawn, the last iron-bound door

unlocked, and she saw by the dim gaslight her husband standing ready to receive her in his outstretched arms.

"Oh, Ferdinand!" was all the tender-hearted wife could say, and for quite five minutes neither could utter any coherent words. She lay there in his arms, sobbing her heart out, while he vainly strove to soothe and quiet her with endearing epithets, and tried to kiss away her tears.

"What does it mean, Ferdinand? I am utterly amazed, bewildered. Why are you here? Tell me, quick. I think I shall understand."

"I have been arrested on a monstrous charge. I am accused, falsely accused—you believe me, Rachel?"

"As if I could doubt my husband. Whatever they say, whatever happens, I could never bring myself to think evil of you, Ferdinand."

"I had enemies, I knew that—bitter, unscrupulous foes—but I never thought they would bring me to this. It is a most wild,

wicked invention. I am absolutely innocent, God knows——"

"But of what, Ferdinand? You have not told me yet of what you are accused."

"There are those who it seems will go any lengths to brand me, to ruin me utterly, in this world and in that to come. They do not hesitate to charge me with a foul, dastardly crime——"

"A crime? You, my dearest, best-beloved husband? What crime?"

"I am taxed, Rachel—prepare yourself, dear girl; be brave, be strong, for you will find what I have to say most grievous, most terribly hard to bear. They say it was I who killed him; I, your husband, his brother, in affection if not by ties of blood."

"Killed him? Carysfort? You?"

"They say I murdered him."

"Oh! shameful, base, dastardly lie!"

"You do not, will not believe it? That is all I care to know."

"Believe that, Ferdinand, of you?" She raised her tearful face from his shoulder and

looked with earnest trustful eyes into his, now bent so anxiously on her. "Never!"

"I am satisfied then; they may try their worst. Whatever happens, I shall be strengthened and fortified by your simple, unquestioning faith."

"Whatever happens indeed, Ferdinand: if all the world should swear it, I would not believe that you could have done such a wicked, horrible thing."

"My sweet wife, your brave words give me courage. I am ready now to face the worst. We will fight them and conquer, never fear." He bent his head and kissed her solemnly on the forehead, after which there was a long silence; their hearts were too full for words.

"It's growing late," said the Colonel at length—"you cannot, must not linger here."

"Oh, Ferdinand, do not send me away from you! This is my place, here, at your side."

"My sweet, it is quite impossible. The rules are inexorable; besides, you want rest. Re-

member, if you are to help me now, you must keep up your courage and your strength."

"Do not drive me from you, Ferdinand, I implore."

"I am helpless, dearest. We must bend before the law."

"I will not go far then, Ferdinand. I must, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing I am close at hand."

"You will be near enough at the Hall, dearest."

"I could not go there: don't ask me. I could not bear to face my mother."

"You have seen her? Lady Lezaire has not been unkind, I hope? Surely her cruel animosity does not extend to you?"

"She is my mother, Ferdinand, and I daresay she means well. But do not ask me to see her or speak to her just now; I could not bear it. Besides, I could not be separated by all those miles from you. I must be with you always—every moment, at least, that is possible—while you are passing through this awful trial."

"Where will you go? You will be better really at the Hall."

"I will take rooms here in Market Reepham, at one of the hotels, the 'Raven,' anywhere. Do not oppose me in this."

"My sweet pet, I know the spirit that animates you—far be it from me to balk you; indeed it encourages me, and gives me fresh strength."

The adieux between husband and wife were painful and protracted, but at last they were said. Then, as the cab still waited at the prison gates, Mrs St Evelyn, still escorted by Gibbings, was driven to the "Raven" hotel. After this the faithful man-servant then drove on to the Hall, whence he despatched the lady's-maid with portmanteaus and so forth, to join her young mistress that same night at the hotel.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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